

# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

## AN EXPANDING WAR

### 1966



*A Marine from Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, holds his rifle chest-high as he crosses a stream. The battalion is moving to link up with the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, in Helicopter Valley, in July 1966.*

# U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

AN EXPANDING WAR

1966

by

Jack Shulimson



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

1982

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Library of Congress Card No. 82-600567

PCN 190 003086 00

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For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office  
Washington, D.C. 20402

# Foreword

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This is the third volume in a planned 10-volume operational and chronological series covering the Marine Corps' participation in the Vietnam War. A separate topical series will complement the operational histories. This particular volume details the continued buildup in 1966 of the III Marine Amphibious Force in South Vietnam's northernmost corps area, I Corps, and the accelerated tempo of fighting during the year. The result was an "expanding war."

The III Marine Amphibious Force had established three enclaves in I Corps during 1965. Employing what they believed was a balanced strategy—base defense, offensive operations, and pacification—the Marines planned to consolidate their base areas in 1966. At the beginning of 1966, the 1st Marine Division reinforced the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam. By the end of the year, the III Marine Amphibious Force had nearly doubled in size. Two separate events, however, were to dash the high hopes held by the Marines in 1966. An internal political crisis in the spring halted the Marine pacification campaign south of the large Da Nang Airbase. In July, the North Vietnamese Army launched an incursion through the Demilitarized Zone and Marines went north to counter the enemy thrust. By December 1966, Marine units were stretched thin along the 265-mile length of I Corps. As one Marine commander observed, "too much real estate—do not have enough men."

Although written from the perspective of III MAF and the ground war in I Corps, the volume treats the activities of Marine advisors to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force, and Marines on the staff of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in Saigon. There are separate chapters on Marine air, artillery, and logistics. An attempt has been made to place the Marine role in relation to the overall effort.

The author, Mr. Jack Shulimson, is the senior Vietnam historian in the History and Museums Division. He has been with the division since 1964 and is the author of several earlier classified histories and co-author of *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965: The Landing and the Buildup*. Mr. Shulimson has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Buffalo and a master of arts in history from the University of Michigan. He is at present a candidate for a doctoral degree in American studies at the University of Maryland.



E. H. SIMMONS

Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums



# Preface

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*U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* is largely based on the holdings of the Marine Corps Historical Center. These include the official unit monthly command chronologies, Marine Corps messages and journal files, the Oral History Collection of the History and Museums Division, comment files of the division, and previously classified studies prepared by members of the division. Especially useful in the latter category were Captain Moyers S. Shore III, "Marines in Vietnam, January-June 1966," and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph F. Moody and Major Thomas E. Donnelly, "Introduction of North Vietnamese Regulars," parts III and IV of a then-projected single-volume history of the war. Two other former members of the division, Major Jack K. Ringler and Mr. George W. Garand, worked on preliminary drafts covering the 1966 period.

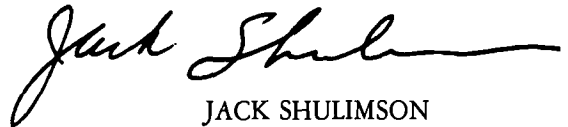
The author has supplemented the above sources with research in the records of the other Services and pertinent published primary and secondary sources. Although none of the information in this history is classified, some of the documentation on which it is based still has a classified designation. More than 135 reviewers, most of whom were participants in the events depicted in the history, read a comment edition of the manuscript. Their comments, where applicable, have been incorporated into the text. A list of all those who commented is included in the appendices. All ranks used in the body of the text are those ranks held by the individual in 1966.

The production of this volume, like its predecessors, has been a cooperative effort. All of the Vietnam historians, past and present, in the Histories Section, History and Museums Division, especially two former members, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers and Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, have reviewed the draft manuscript. Access to Marine Corps documents has been facilitated by Mrs. Joyce Bonnett and her assistant, Mrs. Linda Benedict, of the division's Archives Section. Miss Evelyn Englander, head librarian, and her assistant, Mrs. Pat Morgan, have been most helpful in obtaining needed references. The Reference Section, headed by Mrs. Gabrielle M. Santelli, and her successor, Mr. Danny J. Crawford, made its files available and answered numerous queries cheerfully and professionally. Gunnery Sergeant William K. Judge and Mrs. Regina Strother of the Center's former Still Photo Depository, now a part of the Defense Audio Visual Agency, assisted in photographic research. The Head, Oral Histories Section, Mr. Benis M. Frank, was equally supportive in making his collection available.

Mrs. Vivian A. Lyon and Miss Faye A. Grant typed numerous card entries for the Index, and Major Edward F. Wells provided excellent assistance to the author in organizing it.

Mr. Robert E. Struder, head of Publications Production Section, and his predecessor, Mr. Paul D. Johnston, adeptly guided the manuscript through the various production phases. Maps were produced by Staff Sergeant Jerry L. Jakes and Mr. Richard A. Hillman. Mr. Hillman also did the design and layout of the book. The manuscript was typeset first, for the comment edition, by Corporal Paul W. Gibson. Final typesetting was accomplished by Corporals Gibson and Joseph J. Hynes, with Miss Catherine A. Stoll contributing significant technical expertise, and assistance in final stages from Lance Corporal Mark J. Zigante.

Special thanks are due Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, who established the guidelines for the Vietnam series and made available his personal notebooks for 1966 when he commanded the 9th Marines; Colonel John E. Greenwood, former Deputy Director for Marine Corps History, who closely supervised the comment edition and gave wise counsel; his successor, Colonel Oliver M. Whipple, Jr., who pushed the project to completion; and Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian, who provided me with the benefit of his long experience in writing Marine Corps history, encouragement when it was needed, and general editorial direction. I am indebted to my colleagues in the historical offices of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, who freely exchanged information and made documents available for my examination. I must express my gratitude also to all those who reviewed the comment edition and provided corrections, personal photographs, and insight available only to those who took part in the events. Finally, however, the author is responsible for the contents of the text, including opinions expressed and any errors in fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jack Shulimson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

JACK SHULIMSON



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PART I  
THE MARINE BASE AREAS  
IN EARLY 1966





## CHAPTER 1

# A Larger Force for a Growing War, III MAF in January 1966

*III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs—Command Relations—Planned Deployment of the  
1st Marine Division—The Enemy Buildup—The Marine Counterinsurgency War Versus the MACV  
Perspective—Marine Mission and Future Plans*

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### *III MAF, I Corps, and the Three Marine TAORs*

The III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) began 1966 with reason for optimism. From its origin as the 5,000-man 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) in March of 1965, III MAF had developed into a potent combined arms force consisting of the reinforced 3d Marine Division, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and supporting components. Major General Lewis W. Walt, the burly and much decorated III MAF commanding general, now had more than 41,000 men under his command.

The Marines were located in the northernmost of South Vietnam's four military regions, I Corps Tactical Zone (I CTZ). To the north the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), immediately north and south of the Ben Hai River, separated North and South Vietnam. Bordered by Laos to the west, the South China Sea to the east, and II Corps Tactical Zone (II CTZ) to the south, I Corps extended 265 miles from north to south and varied in width from 30 to 70 miles east to west, encompassing 10,000 square miles.

The heavily forested Annamite mountain chain dominated western I Corps. East of the Annamites, the terrain gradually descended into densely vegetated hill masses, interlaced by river valleys and stream beds. A rich alluvial coastal plain characterized eastern I Corps, with occasional ridges, running from the mountains to the sea, compartmentalizing the region.

I Corps was not only a military and political division, but also a significant cultural and economic area. Its five provinces, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai, contained 2.6 million people. Two of South Vietnam's major cities were located in I Corps: Hue, the ancient imperial and cultural capital of Vietnam, and Da Nang, formerly called Tourane by the French, a large seaport, second in size only to Saigon. The

bulk of the population lived in the coastal region and fertile river valleys where most made their living as rice farmers or fishermen.

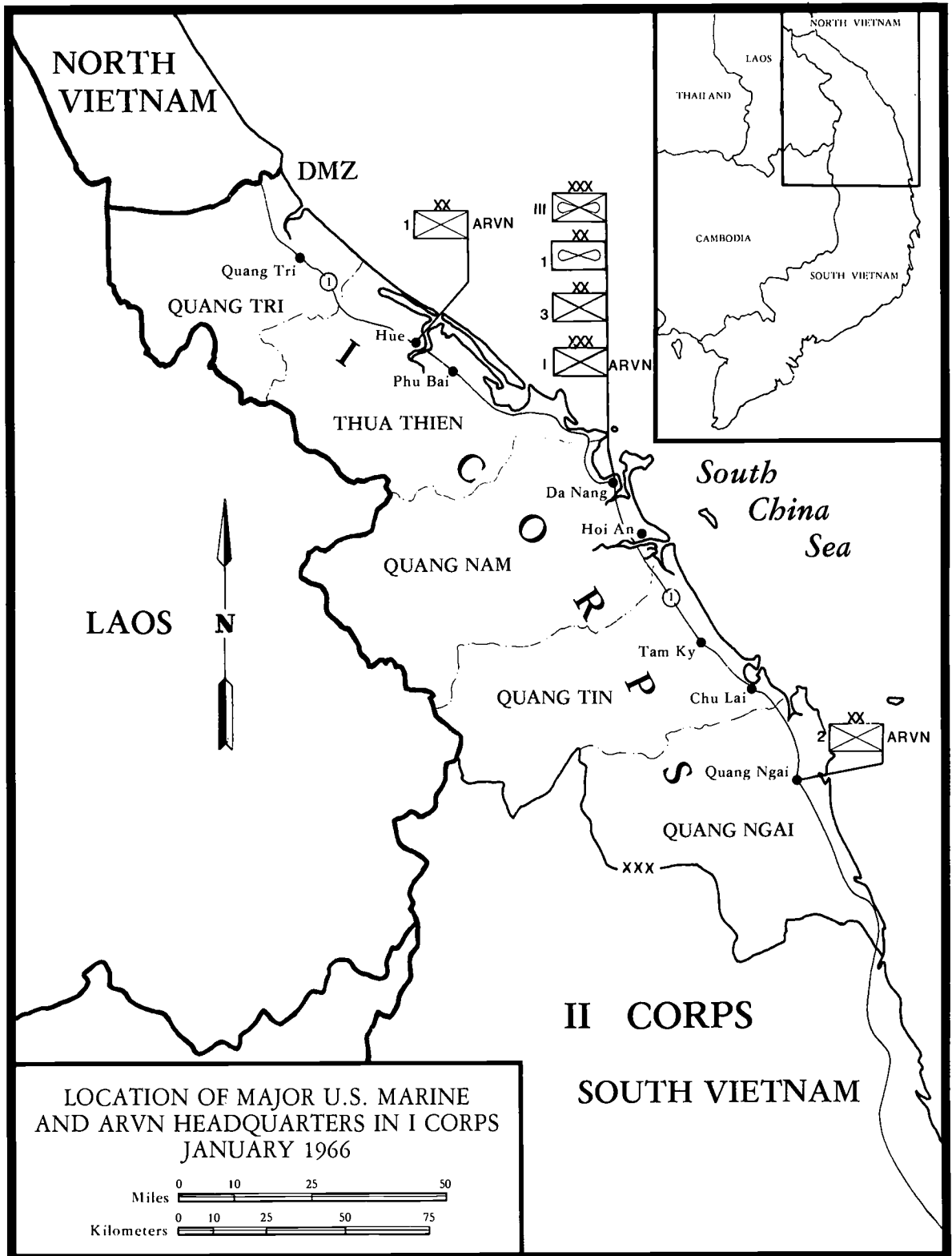
In 1966, two Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) divisions were in I Corps. The 1st ARVN Division, with its headquarters at Hue, was responsible for the two northern provinces of Thua Thien and Quang Tri. In southern I Corps, the ARVN 2d Division, headquartered at Quang Ngai City, was deployed in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. An independent regiment, the ARVN 51st, protected the approaches to Da Nang in Quang Nam Province.

With the deterioration of South Vietnamese Government control in the spring of 1965 and subsequent American intervention, the 9th MEB established an eight-square-mile base at the Da Nang Airfield. By January 1966, Marine forces, now III MAF, were operating from three enclaves in I Corps which contained 800 square miles and held over 400,000 South Vietnamese civilians. The large Da Nang tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) consisted of more than 530 square miles.\* Over a quarter of a million South Vietnamese lived within its limits, largely in the fertile coastal plain between the air base and the junction of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers.

Fifty miles south of Da Nang along the coast was the Marines' second largest base, Chu Lai. By the

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\*According to present U.S. military usage, a TAOR is, "A defined area of land for which responsibility is specifically assigned to the commander of the area as a measure for control of assigned forces and coordination of support." See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, JCS Pub 1 (Washington, 3Jan72), p. 295. Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, who commanded Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 during 1965 and early 1966, emphasized that when his unit arrived in Vietnam in August 1965 the term TAOR referred to much more than tactical operations. "It seemed to imply the Civic Action Program, pacification, charitable works and many other human kindnesses. . . ." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).





Marine Corps Photo A186662

*The American and South Vietnamese flags fly in front of the 3d Marine Division Headquarters at Da Nang. This massive bunkered structure reinforced by timbers and concrete was indicative of the growing Marine presence in I Corps.*

beginning of 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR contained 205 square miles of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces and over 100,000 persons, who lived in the numerous fishing and farming hamlets in the area.

Phu Bai in Thua Thien Province, the third Marine base, was approximately 35 miles northwest of Da Nang and eight miles southeast of Hue. The Phu Bai TAOR was the smallest of the three, only 76 square miles in area with 36,000 persons living in the six villages surrounding the small airstrip there.

Da Nang, the central and largest of the three bases, was the site of the headquarters of III MAF, the 3d Marine Division, and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, with a total of six infantry battalions, were also in the Da Nang TAOR. An artillery regiment,

the 12th Marines, which had its headquarters and two battalions at Da Nang, supported the infantry.

The rest of the 3d Division was divided proportionately between the other two bases. Two regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, consisting of five infantry battalions supported by a two-battalion artillery group, were at Chu Lai. At Phu Bai, the Marines positioned an infantry battalion, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, supported by an artillery battalion, the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, both under the operational control of the 3d Marines at Da Nang.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing also was widely dispersed. One fixed-wing group, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11, was based at Da Nang and another, MAG-12, at Chu Lai. The Marine



Marine Corps Photo A194585

*MajGen Lewis W. Walt, Commanding General, III MAF (left), pins the second star on his newly promoted deputy, MajGen Keith B. McCutcheon. Gen McCutcheon is also the commander of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Vietnam.*

helicopter groups were deployed in the same manner; MAG-16 was stationed at the Marble Mountain Air Facility in the Da Nang enclave, and MAG-36 was located at the Ky Ha Air Facility in the Chu Lai TAOR. Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 163 from MAG-16 was assigned to Phu Bai, while still another MAG-36 squadron, HMM-363, was at Qui Nhon in II Corps under the operational control of the U.S. Army command, Field Force, Vietnam.

General Walt was the commanding general of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division. Walt, an all-conference guard in football at Colorado State University and an honors graduate of the ROTC unit, accepted a Marine commission upon his graduation in 1936. As a member of the 1st Raider Battalion on Guadalcanal during World War II, he earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart as well as a battlefield promotion to lieutenant colonel. Later in the war, he was awarded two Navy Crosses, one at Cape Gloucester, where a key terrain objective became known as "Walt's Ridge," and the second at Peleliu, which also had its "Walt's Ridge." During the Korean War, he commanded the 5th Marines in 1952-53 and then became the G-3 of the 1st Marine Division. On 4 June 1965, as the junior major general of the Marine Corps, General Walt assumed command of III MAF.<sup>1</sup>

Major General Keith B. McCutcheon, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, was also the III MAF deputy commander.\* McCutcheon, a slight, deceptively soft-spoken man, had had a brilliant, innovative career in Marine aviation. He played a leading role in the development of Marine close air support doctrine during World War II and in the postwar development of helicopter tactics. During the Korean War, he commanded HMR-161, the Marine helicopter squadron which supported the 1st Marine Division. Prior to assuming command of the 1st MAF in May 1965, McCutcheon had served as the operations officer on the staff of Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific Command (CinCPac), who was responsible for all U.S. forces in the Pacific, including Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

To help him with the widely scattered forces, logistics, and construction effort, General Walt had two assistant division commanders in the 3d Marine Division. Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt coordinated activities at Chu Lai, while Brigadier General Lowell E. English assisted Walt at Da Nang. This arrangement lasted until mid-March, when Walt was relieved of his direct responsibility for the 3d Marine Division.\*\*

### *Command Relations*

Command relations in the Vietnam War were complicated by the very nature of the war and the way the United States entered the conflict. Starting with a strength of a few thousand when it was established on 8 February 1962, the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) was committed to the training of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces (RVNAF) to fight a counterinsurgency war. As the dimensions of the struggle increased through the succeeding years, the American involvement correspondingly expanded. In 1965, the first major U.S. combat units deployed to Viet-

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\*At the beginning of 1966, General McCutcheon was still a brigadier general. He received his second star in a formal promotion ceremony at Da Nang on 22 January. See 1st MAF ComdC, Jan66.

\*\*See Chapter 4 for the restructuring of the III MAF command relations in March.

nam and by the beginning of 1966, MACV totaled nearly 185,000 men.

General William C. Westmoreland, a former airborne commander and West Point superintendent, who had assumed command of MACV in June 1964, combined several command functions in his person. He not only headed the military advisory effort to the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, but also was a subordinate unified commander under CinCPac. In this latter capacity, he had operational control of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, including III MAF, Field Force, Vietnam, and the U.S. Air Force 2d Air Division, and was responsible for the overall U.S. military conduct of the war, with the exception of the bombing of North Vietnam and the limited air and air-ground operations in Laos. Admiral Sharp retained personal direction of the air campaign in the north while General Westmoreland shared responsibility with the U.S. Ambassador in Laos for the U.S. operations conducted in that country.<sup>3</sup> Westmoreland also functioned as the Army component commander and as such was the Commanding General, U.S. Army, Vietnam, the Army's logistic, administrative, and support command within South Vietnam.\*

General Walt's command responsibilities were almost as diverse as General Westmoreland's. Not only was he commander of both III MAF and the 3d Marine Division, he was also ComUSMACV's Naval Component Commander, Vietnam (NCC), having under his operational control the Naval Mobile Construction Battalions (Seabees) in I Corps. In his role as NCC, Walt was concerned with common item supply for U.S. forces in I Corps, base construction in the northern provinces, and the running of all ports, beaches, and depots from Quang Ngai Province in southern I Corps to the DMZ. As the commander of both III MAF and the Naval Component,

General Walt served directly under the MACV commander. For purely Marine administrative and Marine logistic considerations, however, he reported to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (CGFMFPac), Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak.

As NCC, with operational control of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, Walt had a direct link to the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CinCPacFlt), Admiral Roy L. Johnson. This occurred because Johnson retained command of Naval Support Activity, Da Nang, exercising it through Vice Admiral Edwin B. Hooper, Commander, Service Force, Pacific Fleet. General Walt also held one other position that was distinct and separate from his responsibilities as CG III MAF. Since August 1965, he had been the Senior U.S. Advisor for I Corps and directed the U.S. advisory effort in the five northern provinces. Thus, in one capacity or another, General Walt directed the activity of nearly all U.S. forces in I Corps.\*\*

Political considerations limited the authority of the U.S. military in Vietnam. General Westmoreland did not have command of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, and his military advisory functions often overlapped those of the U.S. civilian assistance program under the U.S. Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who then was serving his second tour in that position. Westmoreland's relationship with both the South Vietnamese and the U.S. Embassy was one of close consultation and coordination. He was a member of the U.S. Mission Council, chaired by Ambassador Lodge, which developed and coordinated U.S. policy within South Vietnam. Moreover, General Westmoreland was the senior

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\*According to U.S. military doctrine, "With the exception of the commander of a unified command and members of his joint staff, the senior officer of each Service assigned to a unified command and qualified for command by the regulations of his own Service is the commander of the component of his Service. . . ." JCS, *Unified Action Armed Forces* (UNAAF), JCS Pub. 2 (Washington, D.C., Nov59), p. 40. As a subordinate unified commander, General Westmoreland could have designated another Army general to head the Army component command, but decided to retain responsibility for this function in his own person.

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\*\*Vice Admiral Hooper commented that these complex command relations were not "widely understood. Yet from them stem much of the effectiveness and flexibility of the Navy and Marine Forces. The exercise of responsibility and authority up the Navy's chain of command was one of the secrets of the notable success of the logistic support provided by the Navy." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant General Hugh M. Elwood, who became assistant wing commander of the 1st MAW in April 1966, was less sanguine about command relations, remarking that "CGFMFPac, in his Op Order, applied the term 'Command less OpCon' to III MAF. This made command relations sticky indeed since it gave CG III MAF two masters. . . ." LtGen Hugh M. Elwood, Comments on draft MS, dtd 4Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

U.S. advisor to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, which according to the former MACV commander, gave him "defacto control over the broad scope of operations."<sup>4</sup>

General Walt developed similar procedures with the South Vietnamese authorities and U.S. civilian agencies in I Corps. He and the Regional Director of the U.S. Operation Mission (USOM) in the I Corps Sector, Marcus J. Gordon, initiated the organization of the I Corps Joint Coordinating Council. The council consisted of senior representatives from the Marine command, the Navy, the U.S. civilian assistance program, and the Vietnamese Government who met once a month under the chairmanship of General McCutcheon. It had no command responsibility, but under its auspices the various American and South Vietnamese civilian and military authorities could meet, discuss their programs, coordinate policy, and smooth out misunderstandings.\*

As significant as the development of the Council, and perhaps even more so, was the close relationship that General Walt established with the volatile I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Chanh Thi. Thi, who as a paratroop brigade commander had led an abortive coup against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime as early as 1960, played a large role in the inner circle of "young Turk" military commanders who dominated South Vietnamese politics following the fall of Diem in 1963. As I Corps commander, Thi controlled both the South Vietnamese civilian and military apparatus in I Corps. Although not openly defiant of Saigon, he carefully selected the directives which he chose to obey. In the South Vietnamese capital, one often heard rumors that Thi was about to lead a coup against the flamboyant Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and the more reticent General Nguyen Van Thieu, who, respectively, as the Commissioner in Charge of the Executive Branch and the Chairman of the Joint Directorate, the official name for the ruling military junta, governed South Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

General Walt did not concern himself with the machinations of Vietnamese politics, but rather with

the establishment of a working partnership with General Thi. The Marine general respected the courage and military competence of the Vietnamese I Corps commander and recognized that Thi also had political responsibilities. Walt later commented, "We sometimes find that this political purpose and military purpose get on collision courses, but always to date we [Thi and himself] have been able to sit down and talk this out." Acknowledging that Thi was an ambitious man, Walt nevertheless believed that the Vietnamese general's ambition lay in making I Corps an example for the rest of the country.<sup>6</sup>

During 1966, the existing command relations were to become even more complex as the war, and the American role in it, expanded. As hope for any peaceful solution to the conflict diminished and the American "peace" offensive, inaugurated in late 1965 by a temporary suspension of the bombing of the north, proved futile, the war increased in intensity and dimension. With the accelerated arrival of U.S. combat forces, MACV planned further alterations of its component commands. The one that directly affected the Marine Corps was the proposed change in the NCC.

Both General Westmoreland and Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, commander of the Naval Advisory Group, believed that the increased naval participation in the war required a naval component commander to be in Saigon, directly under COMUSMACV. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the forceful Commandant of the Marine Corps, who was in Vietnam on an inspection trip in January, met with General Westmoreland and Admiral Ward in Saigon and received their assurances that an independent NCC would not alter command relations between MACV and III MAF. Although agreeing to the need for a large naval role in Vietnam, Greene suggested that the proposal receive further study in order to determine its possible ramifications. When he asked General Walt for his opinion a few days after the Saigon meeting, the latter replied that he had no objection to the transfer of his NCC responsibility to the Navy, as long as Marines had a "strong representation on the policy and working level."<sup>7</sup>

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\*Colonel Sumner A. Vale observed that whatever the successes of the Joint Coordinating Council it did not create a "unity of effort"—U.S. and Vietnamese, civil and military—comparable to

what the British found essential for counterinsurgency operations in Malaya. Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 18Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *Planned Deployment of the 1st Marine Division*

With the continuing buildup of U.S. forces, increasing responsibility was spread among the various component services of MACV. In late 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara recommended to President Lyndon B. Johnson the doubling of U.S. forces in Vietnam during the new year. For the Marine Corps, this involved the further deployment of both ground and air units to Vietnam and the establishment of a force structure for III MAF consisting of 18 infantry battalions, 21 aviation squadrons, and other supporting units, totaling approximately 70,000 troops.<sup>8</sup>

The major deployment for the Marines during the first half of the year was to be the movement of the 1st Marine Division from Okinawa to Vietnam. Major General Lewis J. "Jeff" Fields, the division commander, an experienced artillery and staff officer who had served with the 11th Marines during both World War II and Korea, had transferred the headquarters of the division from Camp Pendleton, California, to Camp Courtney, Okinawa, in August 1965. He held a rear echelon, including the 5th Marines, at Pendleton under his assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles. Even before the establishment of the division forward headquarters at Courtney, one of its regiments, the 7th Marines, sailed from Okinawa for Vietnam with its 1st Battalion. The other two battalions had already departed Okinawa; the 2d Battalion was inserted at Qui Nhon in II Corps and the 3d Battalion became the Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force (SLF) battalion. By the end of the year, all three 7th Marines battalions and a supporting artillery battalion from the 11th Marines were at Chu Lai. Two other infantry battalions from the division were also in Vietnam at this time, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang and the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. These two battalions represented no further reinforcement for III MAF, but were "in country" as a result of an FMFPac intratheater rotation system. Under this policy, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rotated from Vietnam with the former battalion slated to become the SLF with the Seventh Fleet and the latter returned to Okinawa for rest and refitting.<sup>9</sup>

Under the new deployment authorized by the President, the division headquarters, the regimental

headquarters of the 1st, 5th and 11th Marines, the remaining infantry and artillery battalions, and division support elements were scheduled to reinforce III MAF. Lieutenant Colonel Roy E. Moss, the 1st Marine Division embarkation officer, related that he learned about the decision at a December conference at FMFPac Headquarters in Honolulu at which a tentative schedule for moving the division to Vietnam was drawn up. Moss arrived back on Okinawa at 0200, the morning of 27 December and five hours later briefed General Fields. According to Moss, the general asked, "Roy, how do we get all of our units moved to Vietnam . . . ?" Moss replied that the tentative schedule called for 30 ships, staggered over a two and a half month period, to accomplish the mission. General Fields approved and sent Moss to Subic Bay in the Philippines to discuss the matter with representatives of Task Force 76, the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force. At the U.S. Naval Base at Subic, the Navy agreed that with "judicious scheduling [it] could meet the needs of the division."<sup>10</sup>

### *The Enemy Buildup*

The American buildup did not occur in a vacuum, but because of the South Vietnamese inability to cope with the increase in strength of the Communist-led forces within South Vietnam. Allied intelligence estimates of the total enemy strength in South Vietnam had risen from a possible 138,000 in March 1965 to over 226,000 men by the end of the year. MACV believed that these forces consisted of more than 110,000 guerrillas, 39,000 political cadre, 18,000 combat support troops, and approximately 70,000 men organized in regular formations, including 19 regiments ranging from 2,000 to 2,500 men in strength. Seven of these regiments were positively identified as North Vietnamese.<sup>11</sup>

Although Communist North Vietnam had long provided the insurgency in the south with leadership, inspiration, and logistic support, it was not until late 1964 that regular North Vietnamese Army [NVA] units began to infiltrate into South Vietnam, and it was not until the autumn of 1965 that the first major encounter between allied forces and North Vietnamese troops occurred. In October, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) defeated elements of two NVA regiments, the 32d and 33d, during the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in the II Corps Central Highlands. The following month, the South Viet-



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*North Vietnamese Army troops parade in Hanoi. By the beginning of 1966, North Vietnamese regulars were infiltrating into South Vietnam at the rate of 12 battalions per month.*

name 37th Ranger Battalion repulsed the NVA 18th Regiment's attack of the Thach Tru outpost, 16 miles south of Quang Ngai City. Despite the allied victories in these two engagements, the growing North Vietnamese presence in the south alarmed both the South Vietnamese and American commands. General Westmoreland later stated that the North Vietnamese were infiltrating at the rate of 12 battalions a month at the end of the year and more than 26,000 NVA soldiers had come south during 1965.<sup>12\*</sup>

Larger enemy formations continued to appear in South Vietnam in 1966, especially in the Central Highlands, southern I Corps, and the border region between I Corps and II Corps. By early 1966, three

North Vietnamese divisions were operating in these areas: the 1st NVA Division, consisting of the 33d, 32d, and 66th NVA Regiments, was in the Central Highland provinces of Pleiku and Kontum; the 2d NVA Division, consisting of the 21st NVA, 3d NVA and 1st Viet Cong (VC) Regiments, was in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces; and the 3d NVA Division, consisting of the 18th NVA, 22d NVA, and 2d VC Regiments, was in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces. The allies also received reports of a substantial North Vietnamese unit buildup just north of the DMZ.

The Communists made several administrative changes in their command and control organization which reflected the increasing North Vietnamese role in the war, especially in northern South Vietnam. Since 1961, the headquarters of *Military Region 5 (MR-5)*, which extended from Quang Tri Province in the north to Dar Loc and Khanh Hoa Provinces in the south, had been responsible for both military operations and the political ad-

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\*U.S. Air Force historians commented that Rand Corporation analysts in a 1968 study of infiltration raised the estimate of North Vietnamese moving into South Vietnam during 1965 to 36,000 personnel, "roughly a three-fold increase over the total for 1964." Office of Air Force History, Comments on draft MS, dtd 28Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



ministrative process in this sector. Although MR-5 received both military and political direction from North Vietnam, the headquarters was ostensibly subordinate to the *Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN)*, the Viet Cong military high command and politburo. The North Vietnamese partially discarded the facade of subordination to COSVN when they established two new commands. In the Central Highland provinces of Kontum, Dar Loc, and Pleiku, they formed the *B-3 Front* which was directly under North Vietnamese military control, while in I Corps, they detached the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from *Military Region 5*. These two provinces then became the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region* under the direct control of *Military Region 4*, the administrative and military subdivision for southern North Vietnam.

*The Marine Counter guerrilla War  
Versus the MACV Perspective*

Despite the buildup of enemy main force units and North Vietnamese intervention, the major concern of the Marine command in I Corps was with the tightly knit VC political and guerrilla substructure. Of the 30,000 estimated Viet Cong and NVA in I Corps, approximately half were believed to be irregulars, subordinate to local village and hamlet level VC organizations. At Da Nang, for example, III MAF estimated no more than 2,000 main force and local force VC troops to be within a 25-mile radius of the airbase, yet the Communist political and guerrilla apparatus permeated the southern portion of the TAOR.<sup>13</sup> General Walt estimated that this VC local "infrastructure" controlled one-third of the population living in I Corps and influenced, largely through terror, still another third of the populace.<sup>14</sup>

Confronted with this situation, the Marines had emphasized small-unit counter guerrilla tactics through 1965 rather than multibattalion operations against the enemy's main force units. Operation Starlite, south of Chu Lai in August, and Operation Harvest Moon, in the Que Son Valley along the border between Quang Nam and Quang Tin in December were notable exceptions, but the emphasis was on pacification. General Walt stressed that the objective of the war was to win the loyalty of the populace to the government, and the only way to

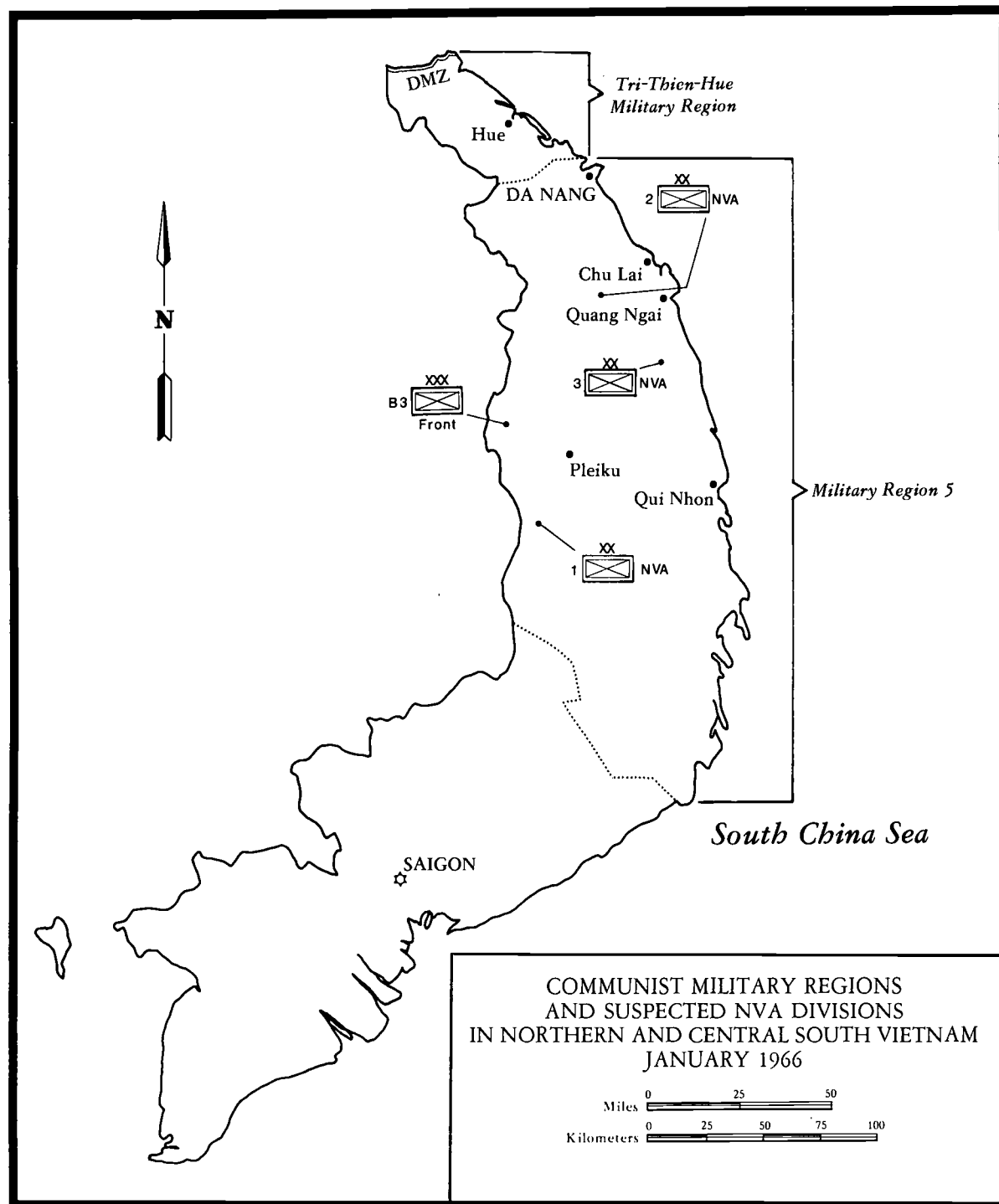


Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*General Nguyen Chi Tranh, who in 1966 was Commander-in-Chief, "Liberation Army of South Vietnam," and Chief of the Viet Cong Central Office for South Vietnam, is seen reading a book in his South Vietnam headquarters. Tranh was also a general in the North Vietnamese Army and a member of that government's National Defense Council.*

obtain this objective was to eradicate the Viet Cong in the villages and hamlets. This was what the Marines sought to do. In describing this pacification effort, one former Marine staff officer, Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., the 3d Marine Division G-2 in January 1966, later wrote that:

... to reassure the villagers that they were safe, supported and protected, U.S. Marines undertook a most demanding pattern of intensive, multiple, day-and-night, tedious patrol activity. The incredible total of man-hours devoted to this end and the sincere, compassionate, and dedicated manner in which thousands of Marines did their duty were never understood or appreciated by outsiders.<sup>15</sup>

General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, was a strong advocate of the III MAF concept of operations. Known since his Naval Academy days as the "Brute," partially as a jesting reference to his small stature, but also in deference to his commanding and forthright personality, Krulak had served earlier



as a special assistant for counterinsurgency to the Joint Chiefs during the Kennedy administration. According to General Krulak, Admiral Sharp used him as a personal advisor "on *all* Marine matters," and he [Krulak] sought to persuade:

CinCPac . . . that there was no virtue at all in seeking out the NVA in the mountains and jungle; that so long as they stayed there they were a threat to nobody, that our efforts should be addressed to the rich, populous lowlands. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Krulak argued:

It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among these mountains.<sup>17</sup>

General Westmoreland had a different perspective. He contended that the introduction of North Vietnamese Army units into the south created an entirely new situation. The MACV commander's opinion was that the Communists wanted to develop multidivision forces in relatively secure base areas, while at the same time continuing extensive guerrilla action to tie down allied forces. His intelligence staff section stated that the enemy planned to mount major offensives in 1966 in the provinces northwest of Saigon and in the Central Highlands. According to MACV, the enemy hoped to achieve control of the Pleiku-Quy Nhon axis and thus isolate I Corps from the rest of Vietnam. General Westmoreland viewed 1966 as a year of transition in which he was building up his troop strength and "a widespread logistical infrastructure (ports, airfield, supply storage areas, etc.)." He believed that in order to protect his vulnerable base areas, he had to husband his forces and resources and use in concert the intelligence available, the tactical mobility, and the shock action his troops possessed to launch spoiling attacks and keep the enemy's main forces off-balance.<sup>18</sup>

The MACV commander, moreover, had some reservations about the thrust of the Marine Corps pacification campaign. He recalled that in 1964, the ARVN 22d Division in the populated, coastal Binh Dinh Province had concentrated on small-unit operations against the guerrilla forces, and as:

. . . progress began to become evident, two main-force enemy regiments debouched from the hills and virtually destroyed the spread-out South Vietnamese units in detail, making a shambles of the pacification program. It took well over a year to recover what was lost.<sup>19</sup>

General Westmoreland's staff reinforced his doubts about the Marine Corps concentration on the small-unit counterguerrilla campaign south of Da Nang. On 15 November 1965, Brigadier General William E. DePuy, the MACV J-3, reported to General Westmoreland after a visit to III MAF that he was "disturbed by the fact that all but a tiny part of the I Corps area is under the control of the VC who have freedom of movement east and west—north and south—outside the Marine enclaves." DePuy stated that the Marines were "stalled a short distance south of Da Nang," because the Vietnamese were unable to "fill in behind Marines in their expanding enclaves." Although impressed with the Marine professionalism and concern for the "security of the people and the pacification process," General DePuy believed that III MAF should use part of its force "as a mobile element throughout the Corps." He recommended to General Westmoreland that the Marines "be directed" to launch large-unit offensive operations against VC base areas "with two to three battalion forces during at least two weeks out of every month."<sup>20</sup>

General Westmoreland agreed with his operations officer's analysis of Marine operations. As he later wrote: "I believed the Marines should have been trying to find the enemy's main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population." Although General Westmoreland wanted the Marines to form mobile strike forces, he "had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt" that he would "precipitate an interservice imbroglio." He recognized that "as a senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution." Westmoreland explained, "Rather than start a controversy, I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the Marines out of their beachheads."<sup>21</sup>

From the III MAF perspective, the differences with MACV were more in emphasis than in substance. General Walt did not consider his "ink blot strategy," with its gradual extension of the



Marine Corps Photo A186695

*Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, holds a news conference at Da Nang during a visit there in January 1966. Gen Walt is seated to his right.*

Marine enclaves as manpower became available, necessarily in conflict with General Westmoreland's advocacy of highly mobile "search and destroy"\* operations aimed at the enemy's main force units. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF operations officer, later observed:

Westmoreland's view was, "Yes, we accept the Marine Corps' concern about pacification, but we want you to do more." He wanted the Marines to experiment with lighter battalions and new tactics. General Walt's position was, "Yes, I will engage the enemy's main force units, but first I want to have good intelligence."<sup>22</sup>

At FMFPac Headquarters, General Krulak viewed

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\*General Westmoreland believes that the term "search and destroy," which was later abandoned, had been distorted by critics to imply "aimless searches in the jungle and the random destroying of villages and other property." Westmoreland states that this was not the case, and that "search and destroy" was nothing more than an operational term for a tactic . . . , synonymous with "sweeping operations or reconnaissance in force." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 83. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., the Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1966, observed in his comments: "Search and destroy means traversing the same terrain repeatedly against a nebulous foe—while the people were untended." Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 5May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

the Marine differences with MACV as more basic. He recalled in 1978 that he differed with General Westmoreland, ". . . not in a limited, but in a profound way." Krulak declared, "Our effort belonged where the people were, *not* where they weren't. I shared these thoughts with Westmoreland frequently, but made no progress in persuading him."<sup>23</sup>

In Washington, the Commandant perceived the disagreement between the Marines and MACV in much the same way as General Krulak. General Greene later stated that General Westmoreland and his commanders were preoccupied with the large unit war and that, "From the very beginning the prime error had been the failure to make the population secure—to stamp out the VC hidden in town and hamlet." Greene contended that:

I Corps was ideally established geographically (the bulk of the population in a narrow coastal strip) to do this—and to initiate security operations from the sea against key points along the coast.

He declared that he had advocated such a strategy:

. . . in a presentation to the Joint Chiefs and to General Westmoreland. The Chiefs were interested but Westmoreland wasn't and being CG MACV his views of the "big picture," the "broad arrow," prevailed. . . .<sup>24</sup>

### *Marine Mission and Future Plans*

Despite the differences over pacification and the big-unit war between MACV and the Marines, the basic directives which governed III MAF operations were broad enough to incorporate both approaches. According to the 21 November 1965 MACV Letter of Instruction (LOI) to General Walt, the mission of III MAF was to:

Conduct military operations in I ARVN Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps, and in other areas of RVN [Republic of Vietnam] to defeat the VC and extend GVN [Government of South Vietnam] control over all of Vietnam.

In order to carry out this assignment, the Marines were to defend and secure the base areas of Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai; to conduct search and destroy missions against VC forces which posed an

immediate threat to these bases; to launch other search and destroy operations against more distant enemy base areas; to extend clearing operations in selected areas contiguous to the major bases; and finally to execute any contingency plan in I CTZ or elsewhere in Vietnam as directed by ComUSMACV.<sup>25</sup>

These all-encompassing objectives were reinforced by the U.S./GVN Combined Campaign Plan for 1966 which was promulgated by General Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff on 31 December 1965. American forces were to secure their base areas and conduct clearing operations in the vicinity of the base, and all "friendly forces were to conduct operations against VC forces in heretofore 'safe havens, areas, and bases.'"<sup>26</sup>

Working within these very general guidelines, General Walt's III MAF 1966 campaign plan maintained a balance among mutually supporting activities. This "balanced approach" consisted of a three-pronged effort comprised of search and destroy missions, counterguerrilla operations, and pacification.\* With the aim of extending government con-

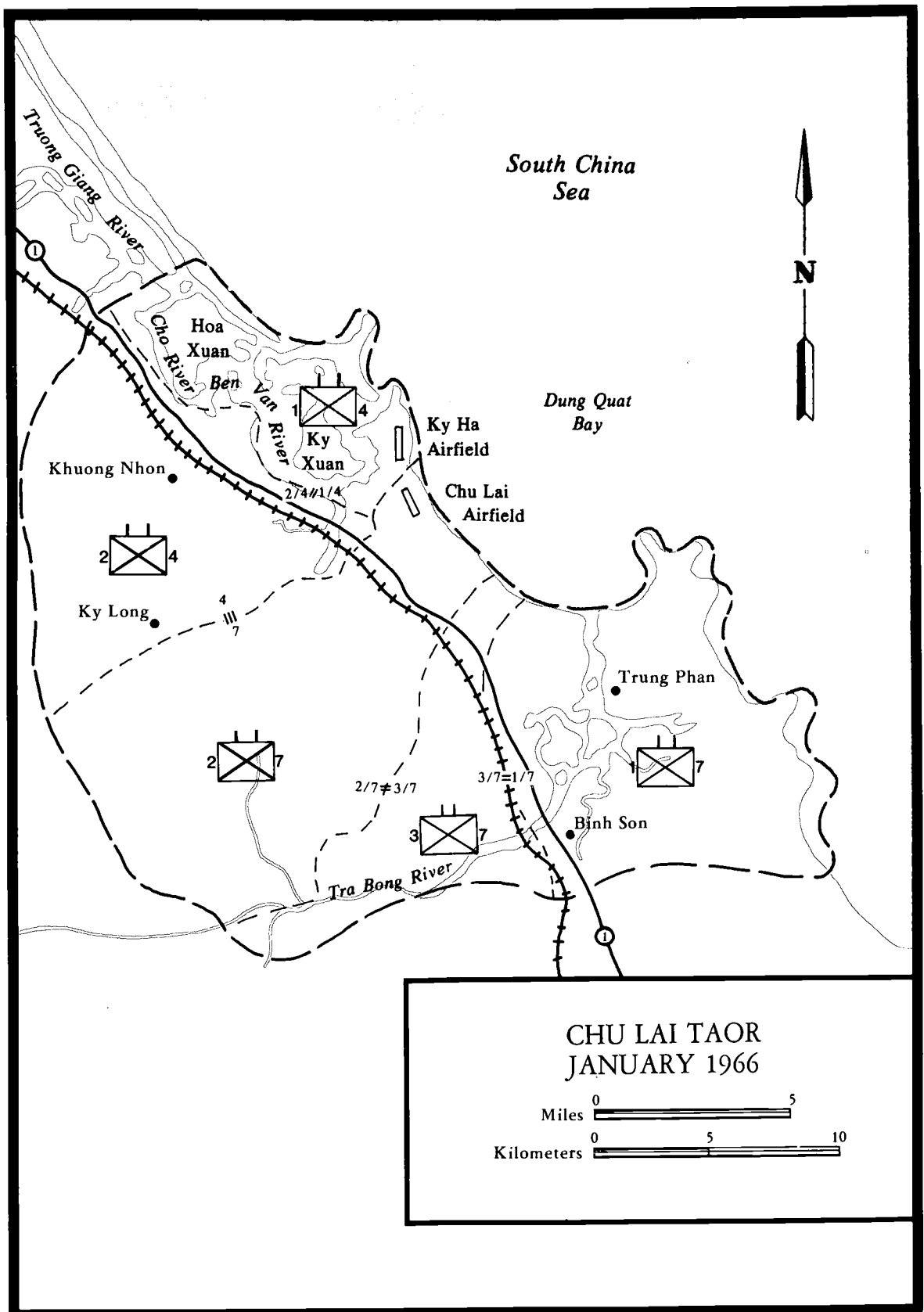
trol throughout I Corps, the Marines were to concentrate first on the coastal region between Da Nang and Chu Lai. Once the linkup of these two TAORs was accomplished, the Marine command was to focus its attention on the coast north of Da Nang to the DMZ and south of Chu Lai to the II Corps' boundary. III MAF believed that it could secure the entire coastal plain from Quang Tri to Quang Ngai by the end of 1966 and could make considerable progress in the populated inland river valleys.<sup>27</sup>

General Walt based his concept of operations on several contingency factors, the two most important being the arrival of additional allied forces and no North Vietnamese buildup except in southern I Corps. With the arrival of the remainder of the 1st Marine Division and the possibility of obtaining operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade, then in II Corps, the III MAF commander had hopes of having 21 infantry battalions under his command by midyear. He required 10 battalions to develop and defend the base areas, which would allow 11 battalions for more mobile operations.<sup>28</sup>

During 1966, the implementation of III MAF plans was different at each of the Marine enclaves; the military situation at each base was dissimilar and called for various approaches. With only one infantry battalion at Phu Bai, the northern Marine enclave was primarily concerned about base defense. At Da Nang, major emphasis was on pacification because of the highly concentrated population south of the airbase. Although not neglecting the pacification aspects, the proportionately stronger Marine forces in the less settled Chu Lai region were able to mount operations against the enemy's regular force buildup in southern I Corps.

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\*General Krulak commented in 1978 that this "'balanced approach' was a compromise with Westmoreland and not a balance, that every man we put into hunting for the NVA was wasted. . . ." The former FMFPac commander further maintained that he had sought to persuade CinCPac that this approach was "a mutation strategy . . . designed to pacify all shades of strategic thought; that if we persisted in such a compromise, we would bleed ourselves—which we did." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 1978] (Vietnam Comment File).



## CHAPTER 2

# Expanding War in Southern I Corps

### *The Chu Lai TAOR—Operation Double Eagle*

#### *The Chu Lai TAOR*

In January 1966, the Chu Lai TAOR, which straddled the Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Province boundary, stretched from Hoa Xuan Island in the north to just below the town of Binh Son in the south, a distance of 17 miles. The eastern portion of the TAOR bordered the South China Sea and the western sector extended 15 miles inland at its widest point. Route 1, the major north-south highway, bisected the TAOR, paralleling the coast and connecting Chu Lai to Da Nang, 57 miles to the northwest, and Quang Ngai City, 20 miles to the south.

In the Chu Lai region, the Annamite chain reaches within four miles of the sea and the coastal plain is relatively narrow, limiting the amount of arable land. Several rivers provide drainage, the most important being the Truong Giang, the Cho, the Ben Van, and the Tra Bong. With the South China Sea, these waterways form islands, peninsulas, coves, and bays along the coast which provide an excellent livelihood for the inhabitants of the several fishing villages in the region.

Selected in 1964 as a possible site for a supplementary airbase to Da Nang, Chu Lai became a major Marine base in May 1965. Immediately after landing, Marines and Seabees began work on a short airfield for tactical support (SATS) inland from Dung Quat Bay, aligned with the prevailing winds, northwest to southeast. Within a month, MAG-12's Douglas A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft were flying from Chu Lai. Soil stabilization was a continuous problem throughout 1965, but at least half the 8,000-foot runway was always operational. In addition, III MAF had contracted with a U.S. commercial firm for the construction of a permanent 10,000-foot concrete runway, 2,000 meters west of the SATS

field.\* Northwest of the SATS field, the Marines and Seabees had already built a helicopter air facility on Ky Ha Peninsula, which, since September 1965, had been the base of operations for MAG-36.

With the buildup of Marine forces at Chu Lai during the summer of 1965, General Walt appointed Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, one of his two assistant division commanders (ADC), the base coordinator. In November 1965, newly promoted Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt relieved Karch at Chu Lai after the latter had completed his overseas tour. Platt was responsible for the 14,000 Marines at Chu Lai, the defense of the base, and all tactical ground operations. He had operational control of two reinforced infantry regiments, the 4th and 7th Marines, and the artillery group, consisting of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines. As the Chu Lai Base Coordinator, General Platt directed the security arrangements for the two Marine aircraft groups, Colonel Leslie E. Brown's MAG-12 and Colonel William G. Johnson's MAG-36, as well as for the Chu Lai Logistic Support Unit.

The two infantry regiments shared the responsibility for the defense of the base. Colonel James F. McClanahan's 4th Marines had two battalions on line for the protection of the northern and central portions of the TAOR. His northernmost, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, defended the northern coastal approaches and the Chu Lai vital areas.

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\*In the strict sense, Chu Lai was not a true SATS field. "A SATS is a type of shore-based carrier deck complete with catapult and arresting gear. The Chu Lai field was longer than a true SATS and a catapult was not installed until April 1966, but it did use SATS components." LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation in Vietnam, 1962-70," *Naval Review*, 1971, pp. 129-130. For additional information concerning the building of the airfield and 1965 operations, see Chapter 18 and Jack Shulimson and Major Charles Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1965* (Washington: His&MusDiv, HQMC, 1978), Chapters 3 and 12.



Marine Corps Photo A186377

*Two Marines relax outside their defensive positions on the outskirts of a hamlet in the western sector of the Chu Lai Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). The men are from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines.*



Marine Corps Photo A186383

*Marines of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines cross a flooded rice paddy in the western Chu Lai sector. The troops are after local guerrillas who have fired upon them.*

Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, maintained his command post and two companies on Ky Ha Peninsula, and his other two companies were on Ky Xuan and Ky Hoa Islands which controlled the access into the inland waterways of the northern TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Rodolfo L. Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines manned the defenses in the central portion of the TAOR, operating west of the airfield and Route 1. The battalion's area of operations centered around the farming villages of Khuong Nhon and Ky Long in the western sector of the TAOR.

Colonel Oscar F. Peatross' 7th Marines had all three battalions on line to secure the southern sector defenses. Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, on the coast, had a company-size combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula and tied in with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines on its western flank. The 3d Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley, was responsible for most of the sector in Quang Ngai province immediately to the west of Route 1. Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, flanked by the 4th Marines on the

north and Bodley's battalion to the east, was responsible for the southwestern portion of the TAOR.

During the first weeks of January, securing TAORs was the main objective of both the 4th and 7th Marines, with the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's battalion which participated in the 3d Marines' Operation Mallard from 10-17 January in the An Hoa region south of Da Nang. The two regiments had established several civil affairs programs in conjunction with the Vietnamese authorities. These included such diverse activities as the distribution of food and clothing, medical assistance programs, and school and market place construction. Nevertheless, the major emphasis of the Marine battalions at Chu Lai was in aggressive small-unit patrolling designed to eliminate the VC guerrillas.

Contact was sparse throughout most of January in the 7th Marines TAOR. Only the company stationed at the combat base on the Trung Phan Peninsula had any significant combat. It accounted for 10 of the 13 VC killed by the regiment during the month. According to Colonel Peatross, the VC tactics consisted of



small-scale probes, harassment of patrols, and extensive use of land mines.<sup>1</sup>

In the 4th Marines TAOR, Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion found and destroyed more than 40 mines and booby traps. Although reporting a marked increase in reconnaissance and probing activity by the *VC A-19* and *A-21 Local Force Companies*, the thinly spread 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to the northeast found itself hard pressed to engage the VC in significant numbers, killing only one VC and capturing seven while sustaining nine casualties, including five dead.<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the battalion commander, later stated that his main concern during the period "was that the VC would bring 120mm mortars onto Hoa Xuan Island," located just northwest of Ky Hoa Island, and thus bring the Ky Ha airfield within mortar range. He explained that since he "was 'two-hatted,'" serving also as the Ky Ha defense commander, and that two of his companies "were tied by order to manning the 'swath' on Ky Ha during hours of darkness, we were too 'troop poor' to occupy Hoa Xuan." Sullivan declared that his requests for a fifth company "to 'sit on top' of the *A-19* and *A-21 VC LF Companies*, who were active on Hoa Xuan, were denied." The battalion commander several years later remarked:

Hoa Xuan, according to my mission, had to be patrolled each week. It made no difference if I sent a platoon up there, or exercised the whole battalion, Hoa Xuan was exerting an average toll of one KIA and several WIA each week . . . The island was literally nickel and diming us to death whenever we set foot on the place.

He contended: "Occupation of Hoa Xuan, I remain convinced, would have cut our casualties, and virtually eliminated the northern 120mm mortar threat to the Ky Ha Peninsula and the airfield at Chu Lai."<sup>3</sup>

The war for the Chu Lai Marines intensified with the incremental deployment of 1st Marine Division units to Vietnam and the continuing buildup of regular forces in southern I Corps. On 17 January, Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell's 1st Marines Headquarters arrived at Chu Lai, followed a little over a week later by Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's Battalion Landing Team (BLT)\* 3/1. Young's battalion remained on board its amphibious shipping in preparation for the pending multibattalion Double

Eagle operation in southern Quang Ngai Province. These reinforcements allowed the Marines to mount large mobile operations and provided more flexibility at Chu Lai.

In the 7th Marines' sector, Colonel Peatross ordered his battalions to advance 4,000 to 5,000 meters toward the forward edge of the regimental TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, on the western flank of the regiment, began its displacement on 20 January, followed by the other two battalions on the 24th and 25th. Upon the completion of the movement, the 7th Marines established new defensive positions along the Tra Bong River and the 1st Battalion's positions extended as far south as Binh Son across the river.<sup>4</sup>

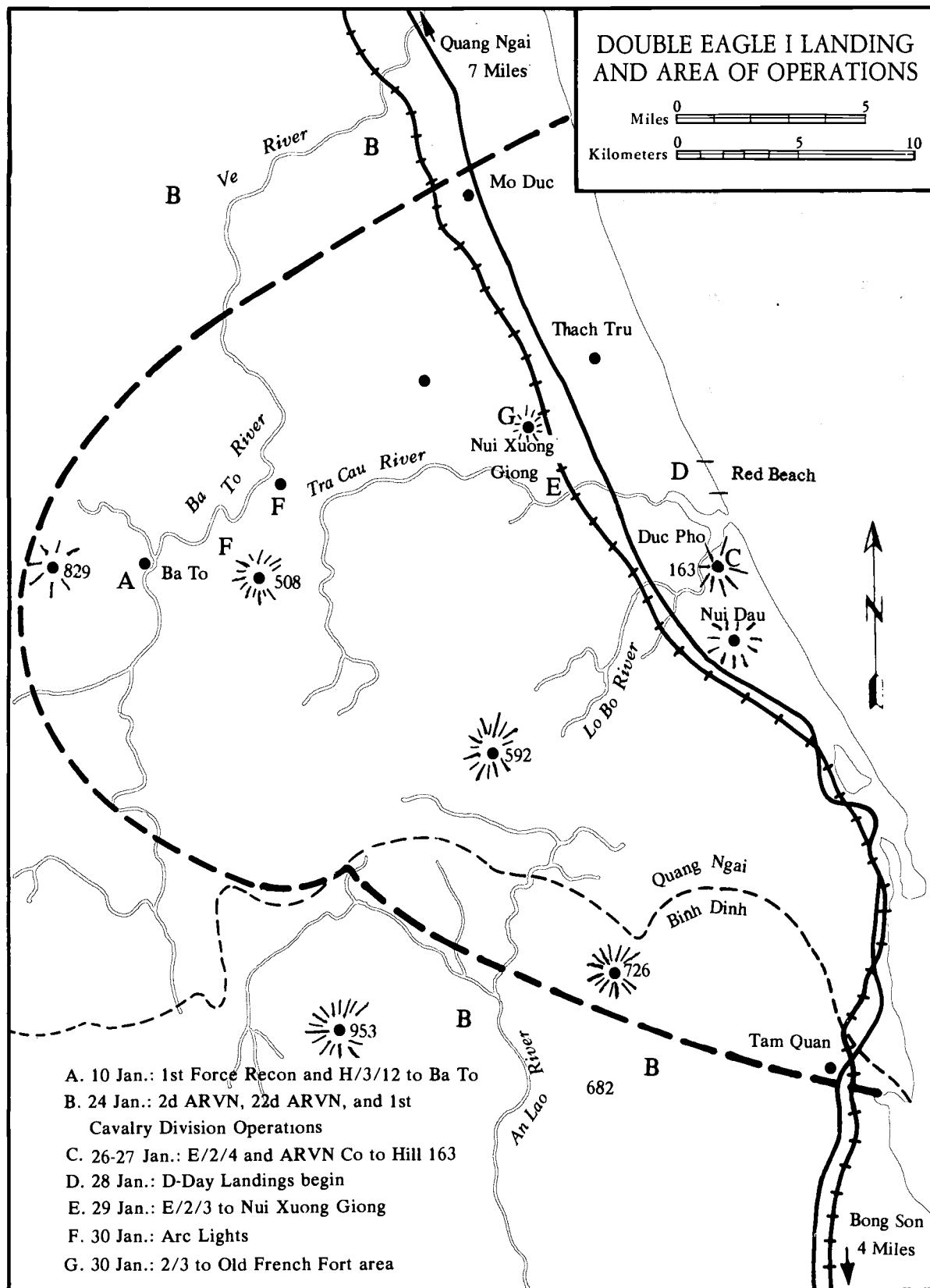
The major change in troop dispositions occurred in what had been the 4th Marines sector. On 20 January, the 1st Marines assumed operational control of the two battalions of the 4th Marines. Six days later, the 1st Battalion, reinforced by a 7th Marines company, took over responsibility for the 2d Battalion's TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion was assigned to the reactivated Task Force Delta, essentially the 4th Marines Headquarters and maneuver battalions from Chu Lai. Operation Double Eagle, one of the largest search and destroy missions in South Vietnam up to that time, was about to begin.<sup>5</sup>

### *Operation Double Eagle*

Double Eagle planning began the previous month. On 7 December 1965, General Westmoreland ordered III MAF and Field Force, Vietnam to initiate a coordinated offensive against the enemy buildup in the region of the I and II Corps border during late January. By the beginning of the year, General Walt had received approval of a general concept for a multibattalion operation in southern Quang Ngai Province.<sup>6</sup>

On 6 January, General Walt ordered General Platt to reactivate Task Force Delta Headquarters for planning. General Platt had commanded Task Force Delta during Operation Harvest Moon in December, but closed out the headquarters upon completion of the operation. A task force organization allowed the Marines a large degree of leeway in both composition and command for operations outside the major enclaves. Its size was limited only by its mission, and

\*A Marine infantry battalion reinforced by artillery and other supporting elements to permit independent operation; the basic unit for amphibious operations.



its formation permitted the employment of air and ground components under a single commander. Equally important, this ad hoc organization permitted the least disruption of the command structure of units remaining in the TAORs. Normally a Marine task force was of such size to merit a general officer as commander. According to Colonel Peattross, "This was a strong factor in getting the Vietnamese generals into the field."<sup>7</sup>

General Platt and Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, the South Vietnamese 2d ARVN Division commander, had established excellent personal relations since working together during Harvest Moon. They also discovered they had a common interest in tennis and played when they had the opportunity. Generals Lam and Platt soon became good friends. On a professional level, the Marines found Lam very cooperative and respected his military judgment.<sup>8</sup>

Similar personal friendships facilitated coordination between III MAF and the South Vietnamese I Corps military commanders. General Walt stated that for large operations, "General Thi and I talk it over—we come up with a concept and we put the concept to our staffs, who get together" and work out the details.<sup>9</sup>

The working out of details for Double Eagle was somewhat more complicated. It involved coordination not only with I Corps but with MACV, Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the Vietnamese authorities in II Corps. General Walt's original concept involved a two-battalion amphibious landing in southern Quang Ngai Province near Duc Pho and a helicopter landing of another battalion in the vicinity of the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To, 18 miles inland. Field Force, Vietnam and RVN II Corps commands were to launch a supporting operation in Binh Dinh Province to the south while an ARVN task force under General Lam was to block the enemy's avenues of retreat to the north.

General Walt established liaison with the Seventh Fleet very early in the planning phase.\* On 6

January, the commander of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), Captain William J. Maddocks, and the Marine commander of the Special Landing Force, Colonel John R. Burnett, visited III MAF to discuss the operation. By the next day, General Walt's staff and the amphibious commanders had adopted a tentative concept of operations for the proposed landing. Shortly after the departure of Maddocks and Burnett from Da Nang, Admiral Sharp approved the plans and the assignment of two battalions for the landing, BLT 2/3, the SLF battalion, and BLT 3/1, which at that time was on board Seventh Fleet amphibious shipping for its previously planned move to Chu Lai. On 12 January, Vice Admiral John J. Hyland, Commander of the Seventh Fleet, issued his initiating directive for the operation, designating Captain Maddocks commander of the amphibious task force, and Colonel Burnett commander of the landing force. In accordance with amphibious doctrine, the amphibious commander was to transfer operational control of the ground forces to the III MAF ground commander for the operation, General Platt, once all the troops were ashore.<sup>10</sup>

The morning after Admiral Hyland issued his directive, General Thi, the I Corps commander, hosted a conference at his Da Nang headquarters, which included the senior U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders in both I and II Corps. General Thi explained that the purpose of the meeting was to develop an overall concept for operations in southern Quang Ngai-northern Binh Dinh Provinces. After a two-hour discussion, the conference reached a general agreement. Most of the conferees believed that the NVA and VC main force units were in Quang Ngai Province, but that their base areas were located in the Tam Quan coastal region and the An Lao River Valley in Binh Dinh Province. The III MAF task force, buttressed by 2d ARVN Division units, was to destroy the enemy main force units while the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), in a

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\*III MAF was under the operational control of MACV while the Seventh Fleet was a component command of CinCPacFlt. Both ComUSMACV and CinCPacFlt were subordinate to CinCPac. When General Walt wanted Seventh Fleet amphibious forces committed in I Corps he had to submit his request through MACV which, assuming concurrence, forwarded the request to Admiral Sharp for his approval. Despite this seemingly lengthy command chain, the amphibious forces were normally readily

available for in-country use when requested. Vice Admiral Hooper, former ComServPac, pointed out the reason for this arrangement in commenting on the draft manuscript: "Seventh Fleet under CinCPacFlt, had responsibilities throughout the entire Far East and western Pacific. Its forces, including TFs 76 and 79, had to react to crises, and sometime multicrisis . . . not just in Vietnam." VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [May 78](Vietnam Comment File).

separate but coordinated operation supported by the ARVN 22d Division, was to go after the base areas.

General Walt viewed "these operations as a converging effort to entrap" the enemy. On the other hand, Major General Stanley R. Larsen, the Field Force, Vietnam commander, was less sanguine than Walt and declared "that we should not think in terms of entrapping and annihilating large bodies of VC, but should consider ourselves highly successful to destroy one battalion." Both commanders did agree that the Corps boundaries "were not inviolate—they could be crossed by I Corps and II Corps forces as required to exploit the situation."<sup>11</sup>

During the next two weeks the Marines refined their plans for the operation. On 15 January, III MAF published its operation order which directed Task Force Delta to be prepared to deploy two reinforced battalions by helicopter or amphibious shipping to an objective area near Thach Tru in Quang Ngai Province. General Platt was to coordinate the date of D-Day with the Seventh Fleet, Field Force, Vietnam, and the ARVN commanders. A reconnaissance effort was to precede the operation and U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses were to fly bombing missions against suspected enemy positions further inland subsequent to the landing. The SLF battalion, BLT 2/3, was to remain on board amphibious shipping, ready to land on order to exploit the situation. III MAF modified its order the following day to provide for two BLTs, BLT 3/1 and BLT 2/4, to land over the beach on D-Day. Later, on 16 January, General Walt established D-Day for the operation as 28 January, so BLT 3/1 and the SLF BLT could conduct a practice landing in the Philippines.<sup>12</sup>

General Platt and his staff expedited final planning for the operation. His ADC command group, reinforced by the Headquarters Company of the 4th Marines as well as members of the 3d Marine Division and 7th Marines staffs, provided the personnel for the Task Force Delta Headquarters. Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the former 3d Division Chief of Staff who had relieved Colonel McClanahan on 24 January 1966 as commander of the 4th Marines, became General Platt's Chief of Staff for the operation. After establishing liaison with the Seventh Fleet, General Platt and Colonel Johnson, whose MAG-36 was to provide helicopter support for the operation, visited General Lam at his headquarters in Quang Ngai to coordinate with the 2d ARVN

Division. On 24 January, the task force commander published his operation order and briefed General Walt the next day on the final plan.<sup>13\*</sup>

Task Force Delta's operating area consisted of 500 square miles, the center of which was approximately 20 miles south of Quang Ngai City and about 10 miles west of Duc Pho. The southern boundary encompassed a small portion of northern Binh Dinh Province in II Corps. Red Beach,\*\* the site selected for the landing, was a 1,000-meter stretch of flat sand about three and a half miles northeast of Duc Pho. Inland from the beach, the assault elements would have to place heavy reliance on helicopters and amphibian tractors for movement in a region partially inundated by numerous rivers, streams, and marshes. To the west lay a mountainous area of jagged peaks criss-crossed by valleys and trails. Despite heavy foliage, there were numerous sites suitable for helicopter landing zones, but the lush jungle vegetation, precipitous hills, and intertwining valleys seriously impeded overland movement from these zones. In short, it was the sort of terrain which

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\*Several commentators remarked on various initiatives taken during the planning phase of the operation. Colonel Noble L. Beck, who was the executive officer of the 4th Marines in 1966, recalled that "General Platt had learned on Operation Harvest Moon that command control of several infantry battalions and supporting air simply couldn't be managed by an inadequately staffed task force headquarters. Accordingly he tasked me (then) . . . Deputy Chief of Staff designate for Task Force Delta for Operation Double Eagle to come up with the Task Force headquarters T/O . . . this Task Force T/O proved-out on Double Eagle and became standard for the expeditionary task force operations which followed." Col Noble L. Beck, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Aug 78](Vietnam Comment File). According to Colonel Zitnik, Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, was made the tactical air commander for the operation. "Colonel Johnson and one or two of his Sqdn. COs and Staff Officers were involved in all the ground planning." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commander of the 3d Engineer Battalion in January 1966, stated that unlike the planning for other operations his battalion supported, General Platt at the Double Eagle briefing, "had each unit commander provide a resume of what role his unit would perform." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78](Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Marine Corps documentation refers to the landing beach for Double Eagle as Red Beach while Navy documentation refers to Blue Beach. See TF Delta AAR Double Eagle I and II, 28Jan-1Mar66, dtd 15Mar66 and TG 76.6 OpO 304-66, dtd 24Jan66.

favored the enemy's highly mobile light infantry and hit-and-run tactics.

General Platt's intelligence section estimated the enemy strength to be 6,000 regulars, reinforced by approximately 600 guerrillas. Two NVA regiments, the 18th and 95th, were supposedly located in the mountains roughly 10 miles southwest of Red Beach, while the 2d VC Main Force Regiment was thought to be four miles north of the NVA regiments. Additionally, the 300-man 38th Independent Battalion and 11 separate companies, ranging from 90 to 150 men each, normally operated in this area. The remaining enemy units consisted of scattered guerrilla bands and support troops including the Binh Son Transportation Battalion with 250 permanent personnel and about 1,000 laborers.

The 5,000-plus Marines of Task Force Delta approximated the size of the enemy's regular units. Ultimately, General Platt would have four Marine battalions under his command, including three BLTs, initially BLTs 2/3, 3/1, and 2/4. The fourth battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 9th Marines from the Da Nang TAOR, would consist of only a command group and two of its four rifle companies. Supporting forces were organized into provisional commands. These were Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's artillery group with a total of 26 pieces ranging from 4.2-inch mortars to 155mm guns and howitzers, a provisional reconnaissance group, an engineering company, an

amphibian tractor company, and a shore party group.

The Marine concept of operations called for three distinct phases: reconnaissance, landing, and exploitation. Marine reconnaissance units and an artillery battery were to be inserted at the Special Forces camp at Ba To well before D-Day. From this location, the reconnaissance Marines were to provide information on enemy positions and movement in the western portion of the Double Eagle area of operations. The artillery battery would not only support the reconnaissance missions, but would be in position to cover the amphibious landing forces as they moved inland beyond the range of naval guns. After the establishment of the Ba To contingent, one company of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines was to conduct a reconnaissance of the landing beach in conjunction with the 2d ARVN Division two weeks before the landing. On D minus 1 (27 January), another company from the battalion, with a company from the 4th ARVN Regiment, was to secure Hill 163, which overlooked Red Beach from the south. At H-Hour on 28 January, BLTs 3/1 and 2/4 were to land across Red Beach and secure immediate objectives north and west of the landing beach. Once the landing force had secured the beachhead, the Delta command group was to land, at which time the amphibious task group commander would pass operational control to General Platt. BLT 2/3 was to remain on board amphibious shipping as the

*Reconnaissance Marines at the U.S. Special Forces camp at Ba To protect themselves from the rain with their ponchos. Inserted by helicopter into various landing zones, reconnaissance teams monitored enemy movement in the western sector of the Double Eagle operating area.*

Marine Corps Photo A186724



task force reserve while the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was airlifted from Da Nang to Quang Ngai City for the final phase of the operation.

Since General Platt wanted to create the impression that his forces were ashore only to conduct limited sweeps close to the coast, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was to stay at Quang Ngai and the SLF battalion to remain on board its shipping out of sight over the horizon. The exploitation phase was to be the main effort, signaled by B-52 strikes against suspected enemy troop concentrations and marshalling areas. These B-52 missions or Arc Lights, the codename for all B-52 strikes in Vietnam, were scheduled for D plus 2. Following this intensive bombardment, the Marine infantry was to move inland by helicopter to cut off any enemy forces attempting to escape.<sup>14</sup>

The reconnaissance phase began in early January. On 7 January, General Walt ordered the establishment of the 3d Marine Division reconnaissance base at Ba To Special Forces Camp. Three days later, six U.S. Air Force Sikorsky CH-3C helicopters ferried four 105mm howitzers and crews from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines and two platoons of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company from Chu Lai to the camp. After establishing his base on 12 January, Captain William C. Shaver, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance company, sent out his first patrols.<sup>15</sup>

For the next two weeks, the reconnaissance Marines reported the movements of small groups of VC. One 14-man patrol, led by 1st Lieutenant Richard F. Parker, Jr., encountered a significant enemy force near Hill 829, approximately 4,000 meters northwest of the Ba To Camp. Lieutenant Parker and an advance party reached the top of the hill at 1400 on 21 January and halted for the day because of poor visibility. Three hours later, Parker's Marines heard yelling and firing from the vicinity of their rear base on the lower slope of the mountain. By the time Parker and his group reached the patrol's rear party it had already repulsed four or five attacks. In the confusion, 1st Lieutenant James T. Egan, Jr., a forward observer from the artillery battery, had disappeared. Parker and his men searched the immediate area, but found no sign of the missing lieutenant.

At 0745 the next morning, the reconnaissance Marines began the difficult climb down the mountain to continue their mission. About two and a half

hours later, 50 to 60 enemy soldiers suddenly attacked from the rear. Lieutenant Parker wryly remarked in his after action report, "the entire descent was made under conditions of heavy contact and was not a controlled movement."<sup>16</sup> The patrol leader and five of his men escaped into a densely vegetated draw and set up an ambush. They were joined one-half hour later by three other Marines from the patrol. Lieutenant Parker then called for an artillery mission on suspected enemy positions. After the battery stopped firing, four helicopters from MAG-36, two Sikorsky UH-34s escorted by two Bell UH-1E gunships, picked up the patrol, the nine men in the draw, and three other Marines stranded nearby. One Marine, Lance Corporal Edwin R. Grissett, was missing. The 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, which had come under the operational control of Task Force Delta on 21 January, conducted other patrols in the vicinity of Hill 829 several days after Parker's men returned to Ba To, but never found Lieutenant Egan or Lance Corporal Grissett.\*

While the reconnaissance Marines continued their patrolling in the Ba To region during mid-January, the preparations for the coordinated allied offensives in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces entered the final stages. On 13 January one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines conducted a surveillance mission with the Reconnaissance Company, 2d ARVN Division in the initial objective area at Red Beach and the immediate coastal region. Ten days later, BLTs 2/3 and 3/1, conducting Exercise Hill Top III, landed on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines as a dress rehearsal for Double Eagle. With the completion of the exercise the following day, 24 January, both battalions embarked on their amphibious shipping and sailed for the South China Sea where they were to rendezvous with the rest of the amphibious task force.\*\*

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\*On 3 February 1978, the Marine Corps officially changed the status of by then Major Egan from missing in action to killed in action. HQMC, Report of Casualty 2866A66 Final JNL/1fr, dtd 3Feb78, Subj: Egan, James Thomas, Jr., Maj USMCR. Lance Corporal Grissett was captured by the enemy and died of malnutrition in December 1968 while in captivity. Information provided by GySgt William A. Hoffman, Casualty Section, Personnel Affairs Branch, HQMC, 13Mar75.

\*\*The two BLTs were embarked in the attack transports *Paul Revere* (APA 248) and *Montrose* (APA 212); the dock landing ships *Catamount* (LSD 17) and *Monticello* (LSD 35); and the am-

On the 24th, four battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division began Operation Masher near Bong Son in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province, 50 miles north of Qui Nhon. Six ARVN airborne battalions and six infantry battalions from the 22d ARVN Division reinforced the airmobile division during Operation Thang Phong II, the South Vietnamese companion operation to Masher in Binh Dinh. Further north in I Corps, General Lam's 2d ARVN Division prepared to launch Operation Lien Ket-22. With the two-battalion South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo attached to his command, General Lam planned a five-battalion advance from a line of departure eight miles south of Quang Ngai City to blocking positions in the Song Ve Valley and the coastal region north of the U.S. Marines in Double Eagle. The combined allied forces for Masher/Thang Phong II and Double Eagle/Lien Ket-22 were the equivalent of three divisions; the area of operations covered more than 2,000 square miles.

On 26 January, Task Force Delta undertook the last of the preliminary operations before the amphibious landing. Nine UH-34Ds from HMM-261 carried 190 troops of Captain Brian D. Moore's Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines from Ky Ha Airfield at Chu Lai to the Nui Dau ARVN outpost, eight miles south of the Double Eagle landing beach. At Nui Dau, Major Ernest L. Defazio, the executive officer of the Marine battalion, assumed command of a combined force, consisting of Company E, 4th Marines and the 2d Company, 3d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment. Shortly after midnight, the combined unit left the outpost, Company E in the lead followed by the ARVN company. The force was to move to the beach and then travel along the coast and secure Hill 163. According to Defazio, it took over six hours in the darkness to cross the one mile of rugged terrain from Nui Dau to the beach.



Marine Corps Photo A186776

*Marines from Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines scale rocks along the shore line as they begin ascent to secure Hill 163 on 27 January prior to D-Day for Double Eagle. From Hill 163, the company had a ringside seat for the amphibious landing the following day.*

Slowed by the loose sand, intense heat during the day, and heavy packs, the combined task unit did not reach the top of Hill 163 until 1300 on 27 January. The Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers prepared defensive positions on the hill which had a commanding view of Red Beach. Major Defazio remarked that he had a "ringside seat" for the amphibious landing the next day.<sup>17</sup>

D-Day, 28 January, was a dismal day with low overcast and light rain. Despite the heavy seas, the first wave of Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's BLT 3/1 landed at 0700 as planned. Offshore, a destroyer, the USS *Barry* (DD 933), and a cruiser, the USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) provided naval gunfire coverage, while eight Douglas A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 and eight McDonnell F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 were on station overhead. The only opposition encountered by the assault troops occurred late that day. Companies I and M were exposed to occasional small arms fire; one Company I Marine was wounded. Shortly after Lieutenant Colonel Young's men secured their objectives, five 105mm

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phibious assault ship *Valley Forge* (LPH 8). Other ships assigned to, or supporting, the amphibious task group for Double Eagle included: the attack transport *Navarro* (APA 215); the dock landing ship *Fort Marion* (LSD 22); the tank landing ships *Tom Green County* (LST 1159), *Tioga County* (LST 1158), *Windham County* (LST 1170), and *Westchester County* (LST 1167); the high speed transport *Weiss* (APD 135); the gasoline tanker *Elkhorn* (AOG 7); the salvage vessels *Safeguard* (ARS 25) and *Bolster* (ARS 38); the attack cargo ship *Skagit* (AKA 105); the guided missile light cruisers *Oklahoma City* (CLG 5) and *Topeka* (CLG 8); and the destroyer *Barry* (DD 933).



Marine Corps Photo A186615

*Marines clamber down net from the transport into landing craft for the assault across Red Beach in Double Eagle. This operation was the largest extended amphibious operation of the war.*

howitzer-equipped amphibian tractors (LVTH-6) moved ashore to provide artillery support for the infantry battalion. Company B from the 3d Engineer Battalion was also on the beach to establish various water points. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the battalion commander, remembered that "The beach assault took a toll of operational engineer equipment and generators."<sup>18</sup>

At midmorning the surf began to build rapidly. Swells, six to eight feet in height, held up the debarkation of Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. Nevertheless, by noon, the battalion was ashore, as were the forward elements of Task Force Delta's Headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery command group. Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines also landed and reinforced the LVTH-6 platoon in support of the infantry.

Weather hampered the operation for the rest of the day. Although General Platt arrived at Red Beach from Chu Lai by midafternoon, he was unable to assume operational control of the Double Eagle forces because high seas and pounding surf prevented the landing of sufficient communication equipment. As a result, the command of forces ashore remained with the amphibious task force commander, Captain Maddocks, and with the commander of the landing force, Colonel Burnett, the SLF commander. General Platt received the concurrence from Captain Maddocks "to coordinate actions



Marine Corps Photo A186581

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move across Red Beach. Ships of the amphibious task force and landing craft approaching the shore can be seen in the background.*





Marine Corps Photo A186738

*Marines unload LST on Red Beach. Rough seas, as seen in the background, hampered the bringing of additional equipment and supplies ashore.*

ashore in the event of emergency," which in practical terms would give operational control to Platt.<sup>19\*</sup>

High seas also curtailed the artillery and logistic buildup. Supplies slowly accumulated at the beach support area (BSA) while the rest of the artillery remained on board ship. These units included the 3d 155mm Gun Battery; the 107mm Mortar Battery, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines; Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines; and a platoon from the 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 11th Marines.

The weather, typical of the second half of the northeast monsoon season, continued to plague the operation on the following day, 29 January. Low overcast and periodic rain squalls prevented any sizeable helicopter operations until late afternoon and restricted both infantry battalions to operations

within 6,000 to 8,000 meters of the landing beach. The Marine infantry did receive some reinforcements during the day. Captain Moore's Company E left its positions on Hill 163 and rejoined its parent battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. That same afternoon, HMM-362, the SLF helicopter squadron, assisted by six MAG-36 UH-34s which arrived at the BSA from Chu Lai, flew Company E, BLT 2/3 from the USS *Valley Forge* (LPH 8) to Núi Xuong Giong, a 180-meter peak west of Red Beach. The Marine company was to provide security for a detachment of the task force communications platoon which was to establish a radio relay station on the hill to insure reliable communications for the planned operations in the mountains and Song Ve Valley to the west.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6, later remarked that his UH-1Es accompanied the SLF squadron's UH-34s to Núi Xuong Giong. He recalled:

The landing . . . was to be unopposed, but at the last

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\*See Chapter 19 for a further discussion of command relations during the amphibious portion of Double Eagle.

minute VMO-6 was assigned to escort the helos on this mission. . . . As the H-34s were landing on the hilltop the lead pilot . . . of my second section observed what he described as a military training unit with some uniformed VC. . . . a uniformed soldier (with rifle) was shedding his uniform while running and as we were trying to get permission to fire we heard the firm order "Do not fire." . . . all the VMO-6 pilots on this flight experienced . . . frustration at not being allowed to pursue what appeared to be, and eventually proved to be, the only few enemy in the area.<sup>20</sup>

The VMO-6 commander conceded that he never was able to pinpoint the originator of the message but believed "that it was either from afloat or an enemy transmission." Zitnik concluded: "This incident occurred before the transfer of control ashore and contributed to frustrations in General Platt's headquarters as well as with the UH-1E pilots."<sup>21</sup>

Although General Platt had not as yet received operational control of the units ashore, preparations for the exploitation phase were well under way on 29 January. Air Force Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports lifted Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command

group and two rifle companies from Da Nang Airbase to Quang Ngai Airfield, 2,000 meters west of Quang Ngai City. From the airfield, which the Marines were using as a helicopter staging area, MAG-36 UH-34s were to helilift the battalion into the Song Ve Valley to exploit B-52 Arc Light missions.

The Marine command attempted to postpone the B-52 strikes for a day, but MACV replied that the missions would either have to be flown on the 30th as scheduled or canceled altogether.<sup>22</sup> Flying high above the low-lying clouds on 30 January, the Stratofortresses struck three target areas in the Song Ve Valley. Despite some improvement in the weather, poor visibility prohibited helicopter operations in the mountains and Marine ground exploitation of the Arc Light missions.

Task Force Delta took advantage of the calm seas on the 30th to bring more forces ashore. The remaining artillery batteries and other supporting units arrived in the BSA. Later that afternoon, 28 helicopters from three MAG-36 helicopter

*Marines from BLT 213, part of the Special Landing Force (SLF) on the carrier Valley Forge (LPH 8), run to board helicopters for movement ashore on D plus 1 (29 January 1966) of Double Eagle. Some of the troop-laden helicopters are already airborne and can be seen flying above the ship.*

Marine Corps Photo A186769



squadrons and 12 UH-34s from HMM-362 transported Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's BLT 2/3 command group and his remaining three companies from the *Valley Forge* to an old French fort northwest of Company E's position, eight miles inland. After the lift was completed at 1730, most of the helicopters returned to the Quang Ngai Airfield since Colonel Johnson, the MAG-36 commander, thought it unnecessary to risk the aircraft overnight in a forward area when they could easily return in the morning.<sup>23</sup>

On the afternoon of 30 January, MAG-36 did establish a forward operating base in the Double Eagle BSA, located 400 meters inland from Red Beach and known as "Johnson City." In addition to the logistic support area\* and task force headquarters, "Johnson City" contained an expeditionary airfield complete with a tactical air fuel dispensing system (TAFDS), maintenance facilities, tower, runway, and airfield lights. As the tactical air commander for the operation, Colonel Johnson established his MAG-36 combat operations center 100 yards from General Platt's command post and adjacent to the mobile direct air support center (DASC) from Marine Air Support Squadron 2. This collocation allowed the air commander to tie in the DASC with the fire support coordination center (FSCC). According to Johnson, the close proximity of the Task Force Delta air and ground commanders "permitted the detailed and continuous planning which enabled us to react expeditiously throughout Double Eagle."<sup>24\*\*</sup>

On 31 January, the weather finally cleared in the objective area and the tempo of operations increas-

ed. At 1210, General Platt assumed operational control of the landing force and began to move inland. Two USAF CH-3C helicopters and a Marine Sikorsky CH-37 Mojave lifted the six 105mm howitzers from Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines from the "Johnson City" support area to the old French fort so that the artillery could support operations to the west. Shortly after noon, Marine UH-34s transported Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines to Hill 508, five miles southwest of the fort. The Marine company was to provide protection for another detachment from the communications platoon, whose mission was to relay radio transmissions from Lieutenant Colonel Trevino's 2d Battalion which was to operate in this rugged terrain. At 1600 that afternoon, MAG-36 completed the helilift of Trevino's command group and his remaining three companies into a landing zone in the Song Ve-Song Ba To Valley, 2,000 meters northwest of Hill 508. The Marine battalion advanced rapidly to exploit one of the Arc Light targets on the high ground to the northeast. During the day, 14 Marine jets, 6 A-4 Skyhawks, 2 F-4B Phantoms, and 6 Chance Vought F-8E Crusaders, provided helicopter landing zone preparations and air cover for the infantry.

The next day, 1 February, General Platt moved his forces deeper into the interior of the Double Eagle area of operations. Helicopters from MAG-36 lifted Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two rifle companies to a landing zone on the high ground east of the Song Ve, 7,000 meters northwest of where the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had landed the previous day. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Bat-

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\*Major General Oscar F. Peatross, who in 1966 commanded the 7th Marines, remarked, "that although Task Force Delta was self-supportive, some critical supplies were flown by helicopter from the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai . . . into the Logistics Support Area." He recalled that he only visited the Task Force headquarters a few times, but that "each time I rode down in a helicopter taking supplies from Chu Lai and on three occasions the helicopter was loaded with among other things . . . radios that had been picked up the evening before, repaired overnight, and returned the next morning." According to General Peatross, Lieutenant Colonel William L. Nelson, the commanding officer of the Logistic Support Unit, Chu Lai, visited the TF Delta Headquarters each day and "brought back a critical list every day, filled it every night, and criticals were flown back the next morning."

MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Colonel Zitnik in his comments reinforced Colonel Johnson's remarks. Zitnik observed: "Aircraft were requested and provided as needed. There became a new kind of relationship between the planners on the spot and the [Wing Tactical Air Command Center (TACC)]. . . . Even though the TACC was not 100 percent up to date, when the word came to them that MAG-36 and the ARVN or Marines, or both, were being committed there appeared a remarkable spirit of cooperation and trust on the part of the TACC . . . they never questioned the need for fixed-wing or helo support just because a request came that did not appear on the pre-planned schedule." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A186620

*Gen Walt together with LtGen John A. Heintges, USA, Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command (USMACV), visit Task Force Delta Headquarters during Double Eagle. From left to right: Gen Heintges; Gen Walt; BGen Jonas M. Platt, the Task Force Delta commander; and an unidentified U.S. Army colonel.*



Marine Corps Photo A186583

*A Marine 60mm mortar section from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines provides fire support for the advancing infantry. Apparently feeling relatively secure, the troops have placed their rifles against the right side of the Vietnamese structure in the picture.*

talion, 3d Marines made an overland sweep west of the fort area in the valley of the Tra Cau River.

During the succeeding days, despite the extensive commitment of Marine units, there was no heavy fighting. Marine units encountered only small guerilla bands. According to Captain James R. Hardin, Jr., company commander of Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the Viet Cong "would hit us—pull out. Hit us and pull out. They wouldn't stick around for firefights."<sup>25</sup> Although firefights were the exception the Marines did take a heavy toll of the enemy's local forces. In two engagements on 2 February, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines accounted for 31 enemy dead in the coastal region north of Red Beach. On 3 February, General Platt began to move most of his forces south toward Binh Dinh Province to trap the NVA and VC main force regiments between the Marines and the 1st Cavalry Division.

In contrast to the Marines, the 1st Cavalry troopers encountered North Vietnamese regulars early in their operation. In heavy fighting which lasted from 28 January through 3 February, the Cavalry's 3d Brigade engaged the 18th NVA Regiment in the coastal region of Binh Dinh Province eight miles



Marine Corps Photo A187622

*Marines move through densely jungled terrain after a B-52 strike. The broken tree limbs and fallen trees are a result of the heavy carpet bombing of the area.*



Marine Corps Photo A186723

*An Air Force CH-3C helicopter lifts a Marine 105mm howitzer from the beach support area further inland. The rapid deployment of the guns permitted the Marine artillery to keep the advancing infantry within the artillery fan.*



Marine Corps Photo A186713

*A heavily-laden Marine 81mm mortar section trudges forward to a new firing position during Double Eagle. The first man carries the mortar bipod and an extra round while the third man totes the mortar tube.*





Marine Corps Photo A421241  
*Marine in the foreground directs an UH-34 into a landing zone during Operation Double Eagle. Gen Platt had the use of two-thirds of the III MAF helicopters for the operation.*

north of Bong Son. During that six-day period, Colonel Harold G. Moore, the brigade commander, reported that his troops killed over 600 enemy by body count, captured 357 NVA soldiers, and recovered 49 individual weapons and six crew-served weapons. The Army brigade suffered 75 KIA and 240 wounded. After being reinforced by the 2d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry near Bong Son, Moore's brigade moved into the rugged interior of the An Lao region to link up with the Double Eagle Marines with the aim of smashing the 18th NVA Regiment once and for all.<sup>26</sup>

As Task Force Delta deployed into the southern portion of the Double Eagle area of operations, General Platt split his battalions into smaller elements, each consisting of a command group and two rifle companies reinforced by an 81mm mortar section. This provided Platt with six to seven maneuver elements in the field while at the same time enabling him to provide security for the

"Johnson City" support area. The task force commander took full advantage of the fact that he had two-thirds of III MAF's helicopters available for his use and ordered a series of small search and destroy missions. His improvised maneuver elements would land in an area, search it, and reboard the helicopters for further movement south. The infantry units accomplished 17 battalion and 19 company helilifts during the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Page's provisional artillery group displaced 47 times, including two small amphibious landings further south along the coast, in order to support the fast advancing infantry.<sup>27</sup>

During the advance, the Marines seized hills both for the purpose of providing supporting artillery fire and to maintain better voice communication with the infantry battalions. The Task Force Delta communications platoon established three relay stations



Marine Corps Photo A186718  
*Marine infantrymen advance through a gully with razor-sharp punji stakes protruding on both embankments. Local Viet Cong guerrillas employed such crude, but effective, impediments to hinder the Americans during the operation.*

on mountain tops to keep radio contact with the widely dispersed maneuver elements. According to General Platt, the task force communications capability was stretched to the absolute limit and the newly distributed AN/PRC-25 radios proved indispensable and reliable, often reaching distances of 20 to 25 miles.<sup>28</sup>

On 4 February, Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, accompanied by a small communication platoon detachment, secured Hill 726, 1,000 meters south of the I Corps boundary, and linked up with Battery B, 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division.\* While the Marines provided security and radio communication, the Army battery fired in support of Marine units in Quang Ngai Province and the 1st Cavalry Division in Binh Dinh. Through the next week, neither the Marine infantry nor the cavalry brigades encountered enemy main force units, only light resistance from local guerrillas. On 11 February, Task Force Delta maneuver elements began to redeploy north toward the "Johnson City" support area, using the same tactics in the retrograde movement as they had in the advance.

During this period, the most significant sighting of enemy forces was made by Captain James L.

Compton's provisional reconnaissance group, which consisted of a command group, Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, and Captain Shaver's 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. While Shaver's men patrolled a 11,500-meter circle around Ba To, the Company B reconnaissance Marines operated throughout the Double Eagle area. The task force reconnaissance group primarily employed four- to five-man teams, who could call artillery and air missions on targets of opportunity.

On 12 February, two UH-34 helicopters inserted two four-man teams from Company B into the mountainous terrain 11,000 meters northwest of Ba To. Shortly after landing, one of the teams observed 31 armed men to their front dressed in green uniforms carrying two mortars. The Marines called an artillery mission which killed 10 enemy. After the artillery had fired another mission, 80 more enemy soldiers appeared. The team asked to be extracted and 15 minutes after its departure, 1st MAW jets, controlled by radar, dropped 39 250-pound bombs on the enemy concentration. The next day, a UH-1E from VMO-6 took out the second team, which had come under heavy fire and suffered one man dead.<sup>29</sup>

During the entire operation, the Marine reconnaissance group conducted more than 40 patrols and sighted nearly 1,000 enemy soldiers. The reconnaissance Marines called for 20 artillery and naval gunfire missions which resulted in at least 19 known enemy dead.<sup>30</sup> Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines at Ba To fired more than 1,900 rounds in support of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company alone.<sup>31</sup>

Gradually, it became apparent that most of the North Vietnamese units had left the Double Eagle operating area. According to one prisoner report, the main force enemy units withdrew from Quang Ngai Province a few days before D-Day. The Army's Operation Masher, redesignated White Wing on 5 February because of criticism in certain U.S. Government circles that the U.S.-named operations sounded too brutal, turned out to be the main show instead of a side event when the 1st Cavalry Division encountered the *18th NVA Regiment* in Binh Dinh Province. Even during Masher/White Wing, nearly half of the 2,000 enemy casualties claimed by the operation occurred during the first heavy fighting. Thereafter, until the end of the operation on 6 March, the cavalry troopers met the same pattern of

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\*Although uneventful for the Marines of Company G, the helilift of the company from its former positions in the Lo Bo Valley, 12,000 meters north of Hill 726, caused some excitement for the helicopter pilots. A Marine aircraft reported taking ground fire from one of the villages near the pickup point and UH-1E gunships were assigned to escort the UH-34 troop transports. Colonel Zitnik, at the time VMO-6 commander and the flight leader of the gunships, recalled, "I directed the troop carrier helos around a burning village from which 50 caliber or heavier fire was observed. I called for A-4 support but could not get it in time (this was an on-call mission laid on late in the day) to help the troop carriers, so I commenced a rocket run towards the village and immediately received fire causing my helo to crash." Zitnik's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William L. Buchanan, landed in the darkness next to the wrecked aircraft and loaded onboard the five-man crew, who all survived the crash. According to Zitnik, "the trip out was memorable," as Buchanan's aircraft, with now nine men on board, "staggered into the air along and between the burning villages in the dark of the night." Task Force Delta sent a reinforced Marine infantry platoon and maintenance men to protect and repair the downed aircraft. An Air Force CH-3C lifted the UH-1E out of the crash site the next morning. See: Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File); MAG-36 AAR, Double Eagle, dtd 28Mar66, encl MAG-36, ComdC, Mar66; 2/4 AAR 5-66, Operation Double Eagle, encl, 2/4 ComdC, Feb66; MASS-2, Report of Double Eagle DASC Opns, dtd 17Mar66 in 1st MAW, Double Eagle Folder, Jan-Mar66.

sporadic resistance that the Marines faced during Double Eagle.

Generals Platt and Lam ended their coordinated operations in Quang Ngai Province in mid-February. South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Bravo closed out Lien Ket-22 on 12 February, having found only a few enemy in its zone of operations.<sup>32</sup> By 17 February, all Task Force Delta forces, including the reconnaissance and artillery elements that were at Ba To, were on board amphibious shipping, or had already returned to their respective base areas. During the operation, the U.S. Marines killed 312 enemy soldiers and captured 19. General Platt's men also captured 20 tons of rice, 6 tons of salt, and 4 tons of miscellaneous supplies including barley, copra, corn, concrete, and fertilizer. In addition, the Marines captured 18 weapons and 868 rounds of ammunition. These results were achieved at the cost of 24 Marines killed and 156 wounded.<sup>33</sup>

Although Task Force Delta ended its operations in southern Quang Ngai Province on 17 February, Double Eagle entered an entirely new phase 50 miles to the north, a development not called for in the original plans. Major General McCutcheon, acting CG III MAF\* at that time because General Walt was in Washington, had received intelligence that the 1st Viet Cong Regiment had entered the Que Son Valley near the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces west of Tam Ky, the area where the Marines had previously conducted Operation Harvest Moon. McCutcheon ordered General Platt to redeploy Task Force Delta and launch Double Eagle II in this region.

Retaining his basic task organization, but replacing the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, a unit which had participated in Harvest Moon, General Platt began the operation on the morning of 19 February. Elements of four battalions, employing both helicopters and trucks, converged on the objective area. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved by



Marine Corps Photo A186586  
*Marines from Task Force Delta confiscate VC rice and salt during Double Eagle. During the operation in southern Quang Ngai Province, the Marines captured or destroyed 26 tons of rice and salt belonging to the enemy.*

truck from Chu Lai to north of Tam Ky where it dismounted. As Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion moved into blocking positions, helicopters carried the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines; BLT 2/3 of the SLF; and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines into landing zones further to the southwest in the Que Son sector. The helilifted battalions then attacked in a northeasterly direction towards the 3d Battalion.

The 1st VC Regiment was not there. Interrogation of prisoners revealed that the Viet Cong unit had withdrawn long before the Marines arrived. For the next 10 days, the Marines swept through numerous villages, cleared out isolated guerrilla bands, and uncovered enemy supplies, but found no major VC units. Task Force Delta accounted for 125 enemy dead and 15 captured. Marine losses were six killed and 136 wounded. The Marines also captured or destroyed caches including 28 tons of rice, 500 pounds of sweet potatoes, 53 weapons, and 450 rounds of ammunition.<sup>34</sup>

\*During General Walt's one-month absence from Vietnam, 10Feb-9Mar66, General McCutcheon was both CG 1st MAF and acting CG III MAF. Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Division ADC, was the acting CG 3d Marine Division. According to English, "Keith McCutcheon and I had an agreement while Gen Walt was back in the States. Keith said: 'You run the ground war and I'll run the air war.'" MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



On the next-to-last day of the operation, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines entered the hamlet of Ky Phu, west of Tam Ky, where the battalion had encountered the *80th VC Battalion* during Harvest Moon in December. This time the Marines found a concrete marker on which was inscribed the Viet Cong claim that they had defeated the Americans. According to Captain Alex Lee, the acting S-3 of the battalion, "While many desired to use demolitions on this sign, it was Lieutenant Colonel Utter's decision to let it stand for the lie it was."<sup>35</sup>

Task Force Delta began returning to Chu Lai the afternoon of 27 February, but the VC made one last attempt to disrupt the Marine forces before the closeout of the operation. In the early morning hours of 28 February, a VC squad attacked the Task Force Delta command post perimeter, just outside of Tam Ky. A Marine platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines repulsed the enemy. Captain Edwin W. Besch, who was at the time the Task Force Delta Headquarters Commandant, remembered that the VC were led by a man "who had dressed in ARVN uniform and sauntered up in a friendly manner to Marines who had taken him into their . . . CP for coffee the night before. . . ."<sup>36</sup> Another Task Force Delta Headquarters staff officer, Colonel Glen

E. Martin, recalled that the Marines stopped the VC assault "just short of General Platt's tent."<sup>37</sup> Captain Lee later wrote that "five naked VC with explosives strapped around their bodies stumbled directly into a 2/7 machine gun position . . ."<sup>38</sup> As a result of the early morning action, the Marines killed two VC for sure, possibly another two, and took one wounded VC prisoner. The Marines suffered casualties of one man dead and another wounded. The last elements of Task Force Delta departed Tam Ky at 1300 on 1 March and Double Eagle II was over.<sup>39</sup>

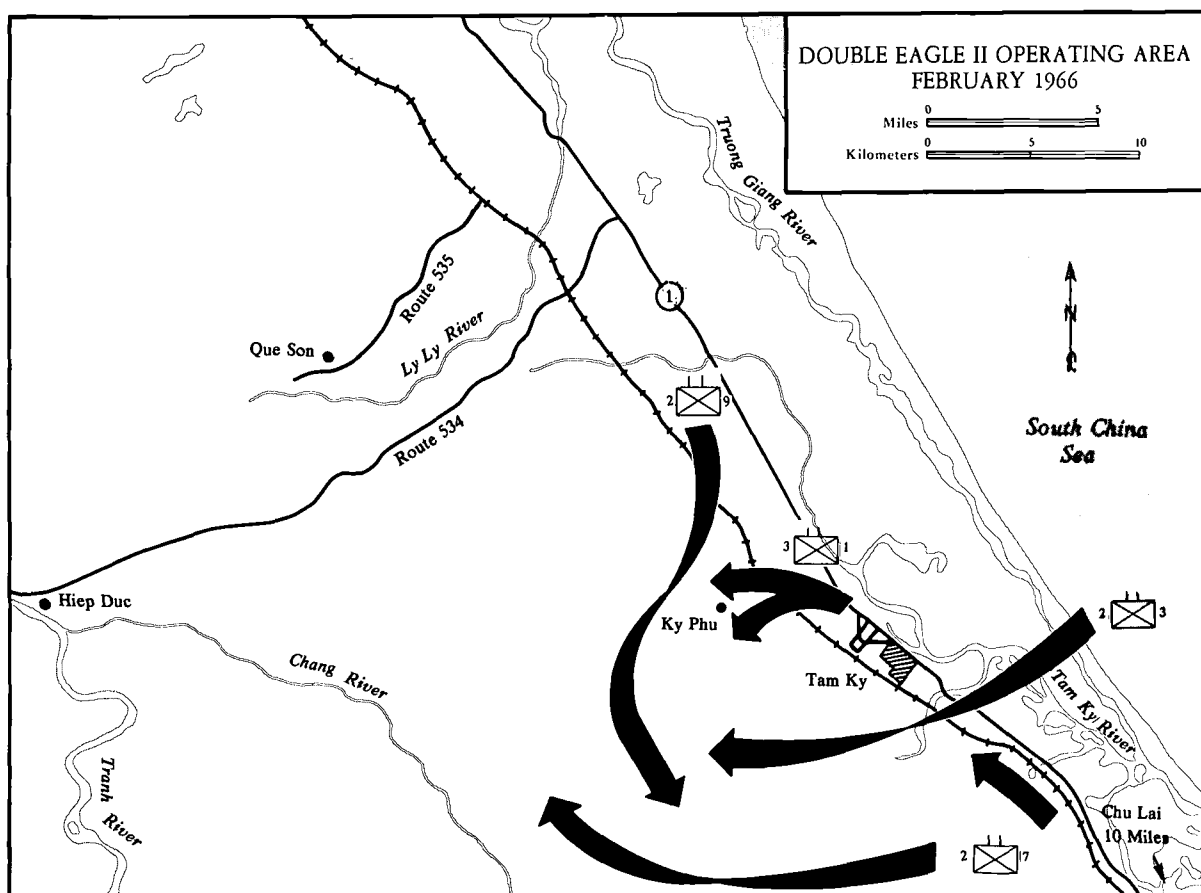
While neither of the Double Eagle operations produced the desired results, General Platt believed that they both achieved an element of success. Although the Marines had not encountered any sizeable enemy formations, they had taken a heavy toll of local guerrilla forces in these areas. Moreover, General Platt argued that the people residing in both the Que Son Valley and southern Quang Ngai Province learned that neither area was "the VC private backyard because U.S. Marines trampled over a huge area with little or no significant opposition."<sup>40</sup>

General Krulak, on the other hand, insisted, several years later, that the lessons of the Double Eagle operations were largely negative. He pointed

*A UH-34 lifts off after bringing Marines into a landing zone during Double Eagle II. Double Eagle II took place in the Que Son Valley, 50 miles to the north of the site of Double Eagle I.*

Marine Corps Photo A186763





out that the operations failed primarily because the VC and NVA had been forewarned. Furthermore, and even more important, Krulak contended that both operations taught the people in the area that the Marines "would come in, comb the area and disappear; whereupon the VC would resurface and resume control."<sup>41</sup>

The displacement of two Marine battalions and supporting elements from Chu Lai for such an exten-

sive period placed a heavy strain on the remaining units in the TAOR. For example, on 27 February, a VC raiding party hit a squad outpost of the thinly stretched 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. They killed five Marines before being repulsed.<sup>42</sup> In February, the 7th Marines reported that the local VC initiated more than 60 incidents in its sector.<sup>43</sup> The Marines had conducted a major, mobile operation, but they had yet to secure their base areas.

## CHAPTER 3

# The War in Central I Corps

### *The Da Nang TAOR—Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification*

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#### *The Da Nang TAOR*

The Marine buildup was well under way in the extensive Da Nang TAOR at the beginning of 1966. Two infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, were reinforced by air, artillery, and a large logistic facility. The four fixed-wing squadrons of Colonel Emmett O. Anglin, Jr.'s MAG-11 were stationed at the main airbase, while three of the helicopter squadrons of Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor's MAG-16 were located across the Da Nang River at the Marble Mountain Air Facility on the Tiensha Peninsula. The headquarters and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Marine Division's artillery regiment, Colonel James M. Callender's 12th Marines, were at Da Nang. One infantry battalion, Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, was the Base Defense Battalion, under direct operational control of III MAF. Including the personnel of the Naval Support Group, the Seabees, and Colonel Mauro J. Padalino's Force Logistic Support Group, there were over 24,000 Marines and sailors at Da Nang.

Colonel John E. Gorman's 9th Marines was responsible for the southern and eastern sectors of the Da Nang TAOR, an area of approximately 250 square miles. Bounded by three major rivers, the Cau Do on the north, the Yen on the west, and the Ky Lam on the south, the regiment's zone of action was cut up by numerous streams. Except for a narrow sandy strip along the coast, the area consisted of rich, densely populated farm lands interspersed with heavy vegetation. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler, who on 5 January assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Lieutenant Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, was responsible for the eastern portion of the TAOR extending from Route 1 to the coast. The 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William F. Donahue, Jr., occupied the sector of the TAOR be-

tween Route 1 and the main north-south railroad. Lieutenant Colonel Joshua W. Dorsey III's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, under the operational control of the 9th Marines, secured the regiment's western flank by occupying the key terrain between the railroad and the Song Yen. Although the 9th Marines' TAOR extended as far south as the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers, the regiment confined most of its activities, with the exception of some patrolling, to that area north of the Thanh Quit and La Tho Rivers.

The 3d Marines, commanded by Colonel Thell H. Fisher, protected the more sparsely populated northern and western sectors of the 3d Division TAOR. Lieutenant Colonel Harold A. Hatch's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, attached to the 3d Marines, tied in with the 9th Marines sector at the Yen River and occupied the strategic high ground west of the airbase. The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III, defended the northern and northwestern approaches, including the Cu De River Valley, where the Marines had first begun their pacification efforts.

Pacification continued to be the principal concern of the regiments at Da Nang. In mid-1965, the Marines first experimented with population security in the village complex of Le My, seven miles northwest of the airbase in the 3d Marines sector. Here the regiment's 2d Battalion, later relieved by the 1st Battalion, occupied defensive positions around the village. Behind this security shield, the Marines instituted a civic action program with the assistance of the local Vietnamese authorities. Le My, at least initially, set the pattern for the Marine pacification campaign.

This system worked well in the lightly populated 3d Marines sector, but the problem was more complex in the 9th Marines area south of Da Nang. A quarter of a million people lived in the villages and hamlets in the 15-mile stretch of land between the airbase and the Ky Lam River. Many were sympathetic to, or dominated by, the Viet Cong; the



Marine Corps Photo A187162

*Two men of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines move past a Buddhist tomb while on patrol in the southern part of the Da Nang area of operations. As evidence of Viet Cong influence in the region, the scrawled sign in Vietnamese on the building in the picture reads: "Long Live the People's Revolution."*

South Vietnamese Government controlled only a thin belt of territory paralleling Route 1.

During the latter half of 1965, the South Vietnamese began the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign, a pilot pacification program, within the 9th Marines TAOR. The campaign was slated for a 20-square mile, rice-rich, alluvial plain in southern Hoa Vang District containing 38 hamlets. The South Vietnamese divided the target area into two sectors, one consisting of a five-village complex west of Route 1 and the other consisting of a four-village complex east of the highway.

In November 1965, the South Vietnamese assigned a 60-man Rural Reconstruction, or *Can Bo*,\* Platoon, to the five-village sector west of Route 1, thus inaugurating the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign. Part of

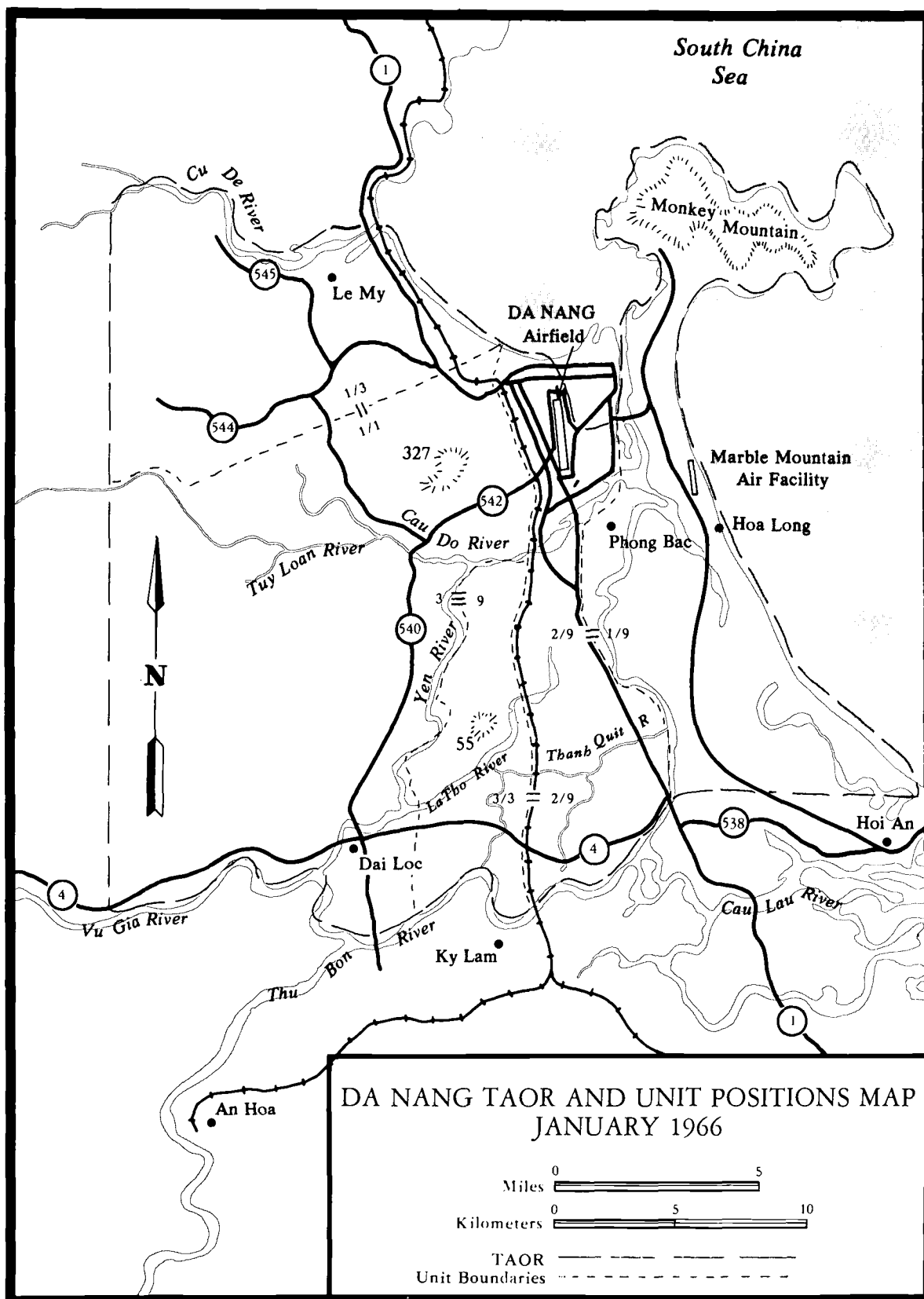


Marine Corps Photo A186455

*A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, pulls the nails from his boot after stepping on a punji trap in the contested sector south of Da Nang. The nails went through the side of the boot but were stopped by the punji liner in the boot.*

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\*The word *Can Bo* is of Chinese origin and during World War II the Communist Viet Minh used the term to designate highly motivated individuals who operated clandestinely against the Japanese and Vichy French. It was their mission to first indoctrinate and then organize the local populace against colonial rule. According to the MACV historian, the South Vietnamese Government attempted to capitalize "on the position of honor and respect these Can Bo occupied in what became a historic and successful revolution . . . and so designated those lower level government employees who worked at the village and hamlet levels." MACV Comd Hist, 1966, p. 502.



the platoon furnished limited security within the hamlets, while the other members assisted the villagers in building up the local economy and meeting community needs. Supplementing the Rural Reconstruction cadre were the 59th Regional Force Battalion (RF) and Popular Force (PF) units. The RF were locally recruited militia who operated directly under the province chief and could be assigned anywhere in the province while the PF personnel operated directly under the district chief and normally remained in their native hamlets. The battalions of the 9th Marines were to provide the forward protective screen for the five villages undergoing pacification.<sup>1</sup>

Although there was some initial progress, the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was in difficulty by the beginning of 1966. Both the Marines and the South Vietnamese had overestimated the ease with which they would be able to eradicate enemy influence. One problem the program faced was that nearly 20 percent of the 9,000 families, living in the five villages, were estimated to have Viet Cong relatives. Complicating the situation even further, confusion prevailed among the Vietnamese as to who was

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines engage VC in a firefight during Operation Mallard. The operation took place northwest of the An Hoa region, later called the "Arizona Territory" after the western badlands.*

Marine Corps Photo A186547

responsible for the campaign. The demarcation of authority between the commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who had operational control of ARVN forces and military responsibility for pacification in Quang Nam, and the Quang Nam Province Chief, who also was responsible for pacification as well as political administration within the province, was vague and a cause for some friction. Nevertheless, the basic factor for the lack of success in the Ngu Hanh Son Campaign was the lack of security within the hamlets. The Viet Cong simply avoided the Marine battalions and attacked the understrength South Vietnamese militia and Rural Reconstruction cadre. Over 15 percent of the latter quit their positions. Instead of building up the PFs and RFs, the South Vietnamese removed the province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Trung Tuong, who had originated the concept, from the chain of command. The program continued to flounder through January.<sup>2</sup>

Another area, the An Hoa region just south of the Da Nang TAOR, was to play a significant role in Marine pacification efforts during 1966. An Hoa lies nestled in a fertile plain 20 miles from Da Nang immediately southwest of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Vu Gia Rivers. To the west, the terrain rises into the foothills of the Annamite mountain range while another series of mountains, the Que Sons, rises to the south and southeast. This small triangular area possesses all the basic ingredients for industrialization. The rivers and small streams in the region form a natural basin with hydroelectric potential. The only coal mine in South Vietnam is located seven miles to the southwest at Nong Son.

The South Vietnamese Government had realized the economic possibilities of this region. In 1962, the Diem regime selected An Hoa as one of its strategic hamlets and started establishing an industrial complex to consist of hydroelectric, water purification, and chemical fertilizer plants. By 1964, the factory equipment was either in Saigon or awaiting shipment to Vietnam. The project engineer, Le Thuc Can, had chosen the sites for the buildings and construction had begun.

It was then the Viet Cong struck, isolating An Hoa from government influence. In late 1964 and early 1965, enemy troops severed the roads in the area leading to Da Nang and the coast. At the same time, they forced the South Vietnamese to halt all con-



struction of a railroad spur to link An Hoa with the main north-south railway.

Despite these setbacks, the French-educated Can was determined to continue the project. At An Hoa, he had gathered together several Vietnamese engineers and established training schools to teach the young Vietnamese peasants the rudiments of mechanics, electronics, and other useful industrial skills. When the roads were cut, Can had supplies flown into the small An Hoa airfield. Eventually, he found it necessary to lengthen the 1,500-foot runway to 3,000 feet in order to accommodate larger aircraft.<sup>3</sup>

Security continued to be a problem. To protect the industrial area, the hard-pressed ARVN 51st Regiment maintained an infantry company, reinforced by two 105mm howitzers, in the hills to the south. Despite the government presence, the VC *R-20 [Doc Lap] Main Force Battalion* controlled the area surrounding the complex. Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, the III MAF G-3, recalled: "My own feelings at the time [1966] were that an accommodation had been reached between the VC and local ARVN commander. . . ." <sup>4</sup>\*

The 3d Marines' Operation Mallard during January 1966 was the first large III MAF penetration into the An Hoa region. Acting on intelligence that the *R-20 Battalion* had been reinforced by the *5th VC Main Force Battalion*, the Marine regiment, supported by a composite artillery battalion, conducted a two-battalion operation in the area. On 10 January, Air Force C-130 transports flew two 105mm howitzer batteries from the Da Nang airfield to the An Hoa airstrip where the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines established an artillery fire base. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by Company G from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, crossed the Vu Gia River in LVTs and began to search for the VC in the area northwest of An Hoa, later commonly known as the



Marine Corps Photo A186548  
*A Marine takes time to relax and eat during Operation Mallard. C-Rations were the basic staple of the Marines in the field.*

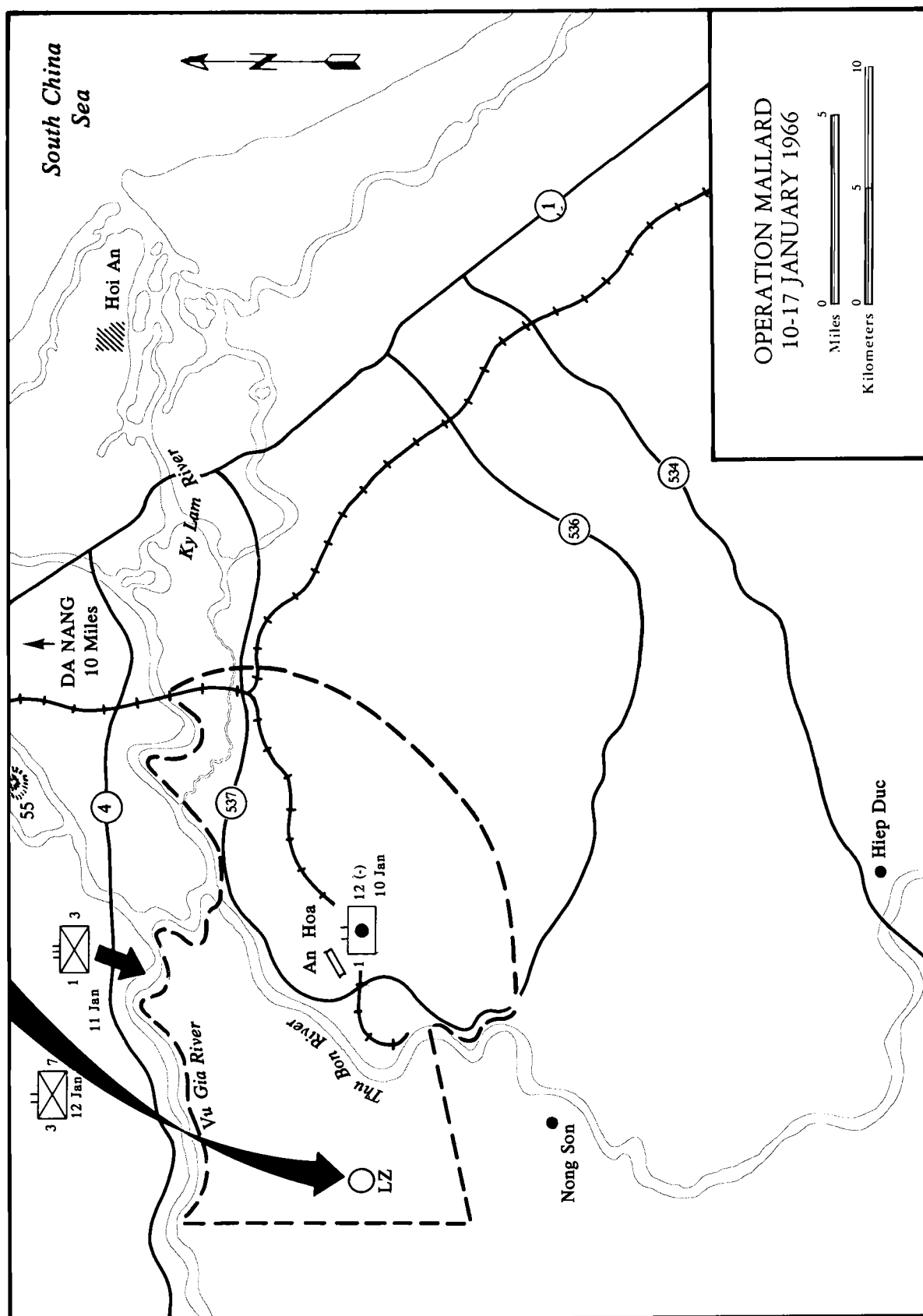
"Arizona Territory" after the Western badlands. A 155mm howitzer battery north of the Vu Gia also supported the operation. On 12 January, MAG-16 helicopters lifted Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which had arrived two days previously at the Da Nang airfield from Chu Lai, into landing zones in the mountains west of An Hoa to exploit a B-52 raid.

The heaviest action occurred during the early morning hours of 14 January in the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines sector. A four-man fire team from Company G, 9th Marines, leaving its platoon's patrol base on the west side of the Thu Bon some 4,000 meters northwest of An Hoa, surprised about 40 VC "deployed in skirmish line with four 60mm mortars on line."<sup>5</sup> According to the fire team leader, Corporal Mark E. DePlanche:

We moved along this trail when all of a sudden I saw something white move . . . It appeared as though there was a hedgerow along the trail and suddenly two more bushes started moving and I yelled, "Oh God" and started spraying the area to my left. . . .<sup>6</sup>

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\*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., in his comments, agreed with Colonel Simmons' view that an accommodation existed between the ARVN and the VC and further remarked on the incongruities there: "There were tremendous anachronisms and inequities that stick in my memory. . . . I seem to recall that there were French resident engineers in An Hoa, who continued to live in very comfortable homes and enjoyed speedboating and water skiing on the lake there." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).





The three other members of the Marine fire team also opened fire and the startled VC "became disorganized and dispersed," leaving behind the mortars.<sup>7</sup> A number of the enemy withdrew to a nearby small hill and began throwing down grenades at the Marines. Maintaining radio contact with its platoon, the fire team was soon reinforced and the VC broke contact. Policing the battlefield, the Marines found four dead VC, captured the four mortars, and 80 60mm mortar shells, and recovered 15 enemy packs and a quantity of assorted small arms ammunition. Corporal DePlanche was the only Marine casualty, sustaining a slight wound to his right hand from an enemy grenade. He was later awarded the Navy Cross and the other three members of the team received Silver Stars for the action.

The military results of Operation Mallard, nevertheless, were minimal if measured with the enemy casualty yardstick. Viet Cong units simply fled west into the mountains upon the approach of the Marines. The important aspect of the operation, which ended on 17 January, was the response of the An Hoa population. More than 300 villagers asked to be evacuated to more secure areas. According to the Dai Loc District Chief, these people wanted to

live in their own hamlets "but not until the VC had been driven out. . . . the people wanted the Marines to come back into their area, drive the VC out, and stay there to make security."<sup>8</sup> General Walt met Le Thuc Can for the first time and was impressed with what the man had accomplished under adverse circumstances and promised that the Marines would return to An Hoa.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of South Vietnamese Government cohesion in I Corps and Viet Cong strength in the Da Nang area prevented General Walt from carrying out his promise to Can for several months. On 25 January, the enemy forces demonstrated their capabilities. Employing 120mm mortars, the VC brazenly shelled the Da Nang Airbase, firing from positions within the Ngu Hanh Son area. Although the attack resulted in the death of one Marine and the wounding of seven others, the mortar rounds caused only minor damage to the base itself.\* Again

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\*This was the second reported attack during the month in which the enemy employed 120mm mortars. In an earlier attack, the enemy shelled the U. S. Army Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province. Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War*, p. 115.

*A Marine attempts to make friends with a puppy during Operation Mallard. The interior of the Vietnamese house in the picture is typical of those in the villages surrounding Da Nang.*

Marine Corps Photo A186549





Marine Corps Photo A186559

*Marines escort villagers who asked to leave their homes for a more secure area during Operation Mallard. Gen Walt promised that the Marines would return to the An Hoa region.*

on 15 February, the Viet Cong revealed the vulnerability of government control in the Da Nang sector when an assassination team killed the Le My village chief during a ceremony in one of the Le My hamlets. These instances demonstrated that continued emphasis upon pacification and security in support of pacification was still sorely needed.

#### *Honolulu and the Reemphasis on Pacification*

At two high-level conferences early in 1966, U.S. policymakers stressed that pacification in Vietnam should receive greater priority. In January, representatives from General Westmoreland's staff, the

American Embassy in Vietnam, Admiral Sharp's CinCPac staff, and their Washington counterparts met secretly in Warrenton, Virginia, to review the course of the war. The conferees examined the South Vietnamese Rural Reconstruction Program, the label for pacification at the time, as well as the structure of the American civilian assistance organization in South Vietnam. The most important result of the conference was its general focus and direction. William J. Porter, the U. S. Deputy Ambassador to South Vietnam, commented that the watchword in Washington was to become "pacification."<sup>10</sup>

The truth of this particular statement became evident the following month at the Honolulu meeting between President Johnson and the Vietnamese Chief of State, Nguyen Van Thieu, and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. On 8 February 1966, the U.S. and South Vietnamese Governments issued the "Honolulu Declaration." President Johnson renewed the American pledge to support the South Vietnamese in their struggle against the Communists, while Ky and Thieu promised renewed dedication to the eradication of social injustices, building of a viable economy, establishment of a true democracy, and the defeat of the Viet Cong and their allies.<sup>11</sup> President Johnson stated that as a result of this conference both governments were committed to winning the "other war," an euphemism for pacification. He quoted Henry Cabot Lodge, the U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam: "We have moved ahead here today in the fight to improve the lot of the little man at the grassroots. That is what this is all about."<sup>12</sup>

Despite its emphasis on pacification, the conference was by no means a repudiation of General Westmoreland's large unit strategy. At the conclusion of the conference, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided the MACV commander with a memorandum of understanding as to the consensus of the meeting. The memorandum approved an increase in South Vietnamese and U.S. regular forces and directed "intensified offensive operations against major VC/PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] forces, bases, and lines of communications—almost doubling the number of battalion-months of offensive operations from 40 to 75 a month." In effect, Honolulu endorsed the so-called "balanced approach." As General Westmoreland recently commented: "It was not a matter of either pacification or

actions to thwart enemy main force operations, it was both."<sup>13</sup>

Still, the Honolulu Conference gave a renewed impetus to the country-wide South Vietnamese pacification program. On 21 February, General Nguyen Duc Thang, the Minister for Rural Construction, became the Minister of Revolutionary Development, and the Rural Reconstruction cadre became Revolutionary Development teams, although retaining the Vietnamese designation *Can Bo*. General Thang designated national priority areas to be targeted for an extensive pacification effort in each of the four corps areas.<sup>14</sup>

In I Corps, the Ngu Hanh Son area was expanded to include all of Hoa Vang and parts of Hieu Duc and Dien Ban Districts and was redesignated as National Priority Area 1 (NPA 1). Lieutenant Colonel Lap, commander of the 51st ARVN Regiment, was placed in charge of both the security and pacification aspects of the program.<sup>15</sup>

Lap's appointment promised both a more vigorous Vietnamese pacification effort and better coordination with the 9th Marines, the regiment largely responsible for supporting the South Vietnamese effort in NPA 1. Colonel Simmons, who relieved Colonel Gorman as commander of the 9th Marines on



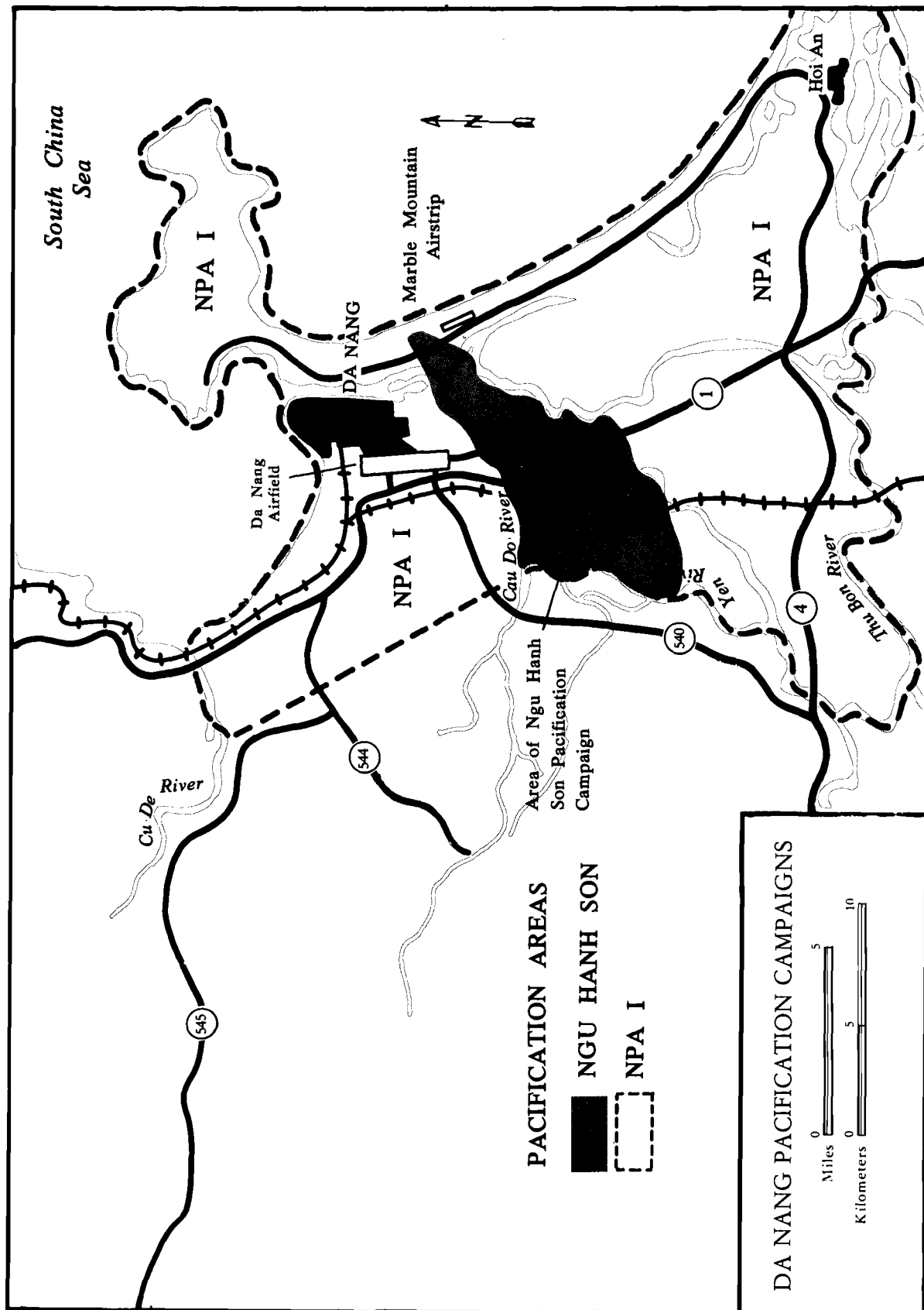
Marine Corps Photo A801847

*MajGen McCutcheon, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and Deputy Commander, III MAF, congratulates Col Edwin H. Simmons upon the latter's assumption of command of the 9th Marines. Col Simmons, the former operations officer of III MAF, relieved Col John E. Gorman.*

*At the Honolulu Conference, President Johnson (at right center) speaks across the table to Vietnamese Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu (leaning forward) and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky (seated to the left of Thieu). To the right of the President is the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection





18 February, described Lap as a "compassionate man, brought up in the classical Confucian ethic, [who] had an affinity with the people and a maturity of judgment which previously had been lacking."<sup>16</sup>

The Marines for their part continued to experiment with techniques of cooperating in pacification with the local South Vietnamese forces. The 3d and 9th Marines each had an RF company under their command. Lieutenant Colonel "Woody" Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, the Base Defense Battalion, had eight PF platoons under its operational control, seven in the vicinity of the main airfield and the eighth in the village of Hoa Long south of the Marble Mountain helicopter facility.

In January, General Walt received permission from General Thi to extend the combined action company program to all Marine enclaves including Da Nang. The program had begun the previous year in the Phu Bai TAOR under Lieutenant Colonel Taylor, then commanding the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. Under its concept, a Marine squad was integrated with a PF platoon on the premise that while the Marines provided training for the local forces they themselves gained knowledge about the local populace and countryside. This, it was hoped, would create a bond of mutual interest among Marines, PFs, and villagers. Although Taylor initiated the training program at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines relieved the 3d Battalion as the Base Defense Battalion on 17 February and established the first formal combined action unit in the TAOR at the Hoa Long Village complex.<sup>17</sup>

In the 9th Marines sector, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with South Vietnamese troops and local administrative and police officials, conducted a sophisticated cordon and search operation in the hamlet of Phong Bac on 24-25 February. While the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support and attempted to remain as unobtrusive as possible, South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers. Although the regiment had experimented with this technique in 1965, this was the first operation to have the full cooperation of the local officials and to bear the title, "County Fair."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>See Chapter 14 for further discussion of the combined action and County Fair programs.



Marine Corps Photo A187590  
*Vietnamese villagers in the hamlet of Phong Bac drink water from Marine litter bags during 9th Marines "County Fair" operations on 24 February 1966. The County Fair concept employed a sophisticated cordon and search technique in which the Marines provided limited administrative and infantry support while South Vietnamese officials screened and registered the villagers.*

The design of the program was "to convince the people that the GVN (Government of Vietnam) was an effective government that was interested in the welfare of the people and that a GVN victory against the VC was inevitable."<sup>18</sup>

During February, the 9th Marines concentrated on plans to eradicate the guerrilla forces in its TAOR. Colonel Simmons reminded his officers that General Walt's highest priority was the pacification effort south of Da Nang.<sup>19</sup> The regimental commander anticipated a gradual, coordinated advance of his battalions from their base areas south of the La Tho and Thanh Quit Rivers to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers. Despite the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines command group and two of his rifle companies participated in the Double Eagle operations during most of the month, the remaining regimental units maintained

a high level of small unit patrolling in preparation for the clearing operation.\*

To sustain mobility and flexibility, the regiment stationed a reinforced rifle squad of 22 men at Marble Mountain which could be rapidly helilifted to exploit a VC contact. According to a III MAF special report, this concept, codenamed Sparrow Hawk, gave a battalion commander "a small, effective air-ground unit able to respond . . . in a rapid manner without tying down large forces of either infantry or helicopters." The report concluded that although the 9th Marines had not as yet killed any large number of VC, "the use of this fast-acting force has undoubtedly prevented a number of friendly casualties."<sup>20</sup> In an incident on 25 February, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's Company E, one of the battalion's rifle companies remaining in the Da Nang TAOR during Double Eagle, engaged 30 Viet Cong in the hamlet of La Tho Bac (1), 1,000 meters east of the railroad and 2,000 meters north of the La Tho River. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr., the company commander, requested and was reinforced by the Sparrow Hawk squad. According to the 9th Marines situation report for the day, "At 1200 all major units involved linked up (at the river south of the hamlet). . . . Total of 11 VC KIA (body count)."<sup>21</sup>\*\*\*

The greatest difficulty the 9th Marines encountered during February was not with Viet Cong troops, but with mines and booby traps. Over 70 percent of the regiment's casualties for the month, 12 of the 17 killed and 120 of the 173 wounded, were a result of these explosive devices.<sup>22</sup> Extensive

enemy use of mines was best exemplified on Hill 55. The hill, 3,000 meters northeast of the confluence of the Yen, the Ai Nghia, and the La Tho Rivers, was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines TAOR. It had to be occupied before any advance could be made to the Ky Lam and Thu Bon Rivers.

In late January, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion began mine clearing operations when Captain Grady V. Gardner's Company I secured the hill. During February, the battalion, supported by mine-clearing LVTE-1s from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and engineers from the 3d Engineer Battalion, started the difficult and dangerous task of removing the mines and constructing the forward battalion CP on the low-lying hill. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey recalled that on 4 February, he personally briefed General Krulak "on top of the only engineer constructed bunker there at that time."<sup>23</sup>

During the month, the engineers lost a road grader and a light crane to mines while constructing a road and bunkers on the hill. The LVTE-1s expended 31 line charges which caused 99 secondary explosions. Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion, remembered that his engineers employed man-pack line charges together with transistorized mine detectors in addition to the engineer tractors to detonate the enemy explosive devices.\*\*\* By the end of February, the infantry and engineers had completed most of their mine clearing mission on Hill 55, but as Lieutenant Colonel Dennis later observed, "No sites were ever considered 'cleared' since the VC would remine and booby trap locations we previously had cleared."<sup>24</sup>

In the 3d Marines sector, Colonel Fisher, an experienced combat veteran of both World War II and Korea, expressed the same concern about the enemy mines and booby traps. Although reporting only light contact with enemy units in February, he

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\*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, observed in his comments that the deployment of rifle units from Da Nang during Double Eagle "resulted in a quasi-reaction force being organized from service and service support units in the Da Nang TAOR to meet any contingency." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*Variations of the Sparrow Hawk technique existed in other sectors as well. Colonel Zitnik commented that "Marines in the Chu Lai sector also operated in a manner similar to Sparrow Hawk, except the designated troops remained in their battalion area and were picked up en route to the target area. Upon initial insertion of the small unit, the parent company (and battalion if necessary) prepared to reinforce its unit again with a larger helo lift." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*\*\*In his comments, Colonel Dennis remarked that the man-pack units "were not a normal item of issue," for a Marine engineer battalion. Prior to coming to Vietnam, he had seen both the man-pack units and the "new" transistorized mine detectors on a visit to the Army's Fort Belvoir. When he later assumed command of the 3d Engineer Battalion, he requested both items "for testing." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187759

*A Marine from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines uses a flamethrower to clear obstacles near Hill 55. This small hill was the dominant terrain feature in the 9th Marines area of operations and was later to be the site of the command post for the regiment.*

observed that the number of mine incidents during the month represented a 110 percent increase over January and a 350 percent increase over the preceding four months. All told there were 52 mining incidents in the 3d Marines TAOR during February, the worst occurring near the Cu De River when an amphibian tractor hit a mine, exploded, and caught fire, resulting in the death of five Marines and one ARVN soldier, and the wounding of 20 other Marines and one Navy corpsman. Colonel Fisher concluded that the increasing incidence and sophistication of the enemy explosive devices reflected a determined organized attempt of the VC to

restrict the freedom of Marine patrol activity in the Da Nang TAOR.<sup>25</sup>

With the expanding small-unit war in the enclave, the Marine infantry buildup at Da Nang continued. After the completion of Double Eagle II at the end of February, Lieutenant Colonel Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, the former SLF battalion, rejoined its parent regiment at Da Nang. The battalion relieved the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in the 3d Marines southern sector. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch's 1st Battalion went into division reserve with its command post at Marble Mountain and prepared to act as a mobile force wherever needed.



## CHAPTER 4

# A New Threat in Northern I Corps

*The Buildup at Phu Bai—The Fall of A Shau—The Aftermath of A Shau—Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon*

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### *The Buildup at Phu Bai*

At the beginning of 1966, the Phu Bai enclave, centered around the airfield located there and eight miles southeast of Hue in Thua Thien Province, was the smallest and northernmost of the three Marine base areas. The Phu Bai forces consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Robert T. Hanifin, Jr.'s reinforced 2d Battalion, 1st Marines supported by a Marine artillery battalion and helicopter squadron. Lieutenant Colonel Edwin M. Rudzis' 4th Battalion, 12th Marines artillery pieces included 105mm howitzers, 107mm howtars (a combination of a howitzer and mortar), and both towed and self-propelled 155mm howitzers.\* HMM-163 under Lieutenant Colonel Charles A. House was the UH-34 helicopter squadron at the base. Rounding out the defensive forces at Phu Bai and attached to Hanifin's battalion, were a platoon each of tanks and Ontos, a platoon of reconnaissance troops, and a platoon of engineers. A small logistics support unit provided the material support for the Phu Bai units. Although the 2d Battalion was under the operational control of

the 3d Marines at Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, as the base coordinator, was responsible for the 2,000-plus Marines at Phu Bai and the defense of both the airfield and the U.S. Army's 8th Radio Research Unit facility based there.

Hanifin accomplished his defensive tasks by extensive patrolling throughout the 76-square-mile TAOR. The terrain to the west consisted of low rolling hills. Lack of vegetation and very little population permitted easy spotting of any movement in this area. North and east of the airstrip, an extensive built-up area, consisting of a series of hamlets and ricelands, extended to the waterways. Three rivers, the Dai Giang to the north and east, the Nong to the east and south, and the Ta Trach on the west, formed a semicircle around the Marine enclave, roughly defining the boundaries of the entire TAOR. The combined action company, which was formed at Phu Bai in August 1965, provided the defensive force for the built-up area, called Zone A. Six combined action platoons were in this sector, one in each of the hamlets of Thu Duong, Thuy Tan, Phu Bai, and Loc Ban, and two guarding Route 1 and the railroad bridges. Roving combat patrols kept the enemy off-balance and maintained the security of the base.

Through 1965 and into January 1966, the enemy threat in the Phu Bai area was largely guerrilla in nature. Enemy units confined themselves to night harassment of the Marine perimeter, minelaying, and intelligence gathering. According to the Marine enemy order of battle, only one VC battalion was in the area, the 360-man *810 VC Main Force Battalion*, located in the mountains 14 kilometers south of the base. During January, the Marines mounted three combined operations with the ARVN outside of the TAOR, but accounted for only 22 enemy dead, largely as a result of Marine artillery and air. At the end of the month, the Marines' major concern was with the VC's increased use of mines throughout the TAOR, and not with any major buildup of enemy forces.<sup>1</sup>

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\*The 4th Battalion, 12th Marines was made up of Hq Btry, 4/12; 107mm Mortar Battery, 1/11 with six howtars; Battery B/1/11 with six 105mm howitzers; Battery M/4/12 with six M109 155mm howitzers (SP); and Yankee Battery, a provisional battery, with six 155mm towed howitzers. Colonel Rudzis explained the reason for the existence of the provisional battery when he commented: "... in September 1965 when the M109s ... were brought into Vietnam as replacements for the towed 155mm howitzers, nothing was known about their capabilities in combat, such as durability, maintenance problems and ability to fit into the scheme of tactical maneuvers. Therefore by stretching the personnel assets of the battalion, instead of providing just one six-howitzer medium artillery battery, two were provided consisting of the M109s and the provisional battery of six towed 155mm howitzers." Col Edwin M. Rudzis, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



With the relatively small level of enemy activity in the Phu Bai area, General Walt planned to keep the Phu Bai forces at the same strength until July. At that time, he hoped to obtain operational control of the South Korean Marine Brigade and position the Korean Marines at Phu Bai. The U.S. Marine reinforcements arriving during the spring of 1966 would either go to Da Nang or Chu Lai.<sup>2</sup>

General Westmoreland and his staff, however, perceived a much larger threat in the northern two provinces than did III MAF. In January, MACV intelligence estimates placed 22 Communist battalions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces as opposed to nine identified by the Marine command. At the urging of General Westmoreland, III MAF at the end of January, prepared contingency plans to counter any Communist thrust in the north. These plans called for the entire 3d Marines to deploy north in the event of an enemy attack or major buildup in the north.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to January, all signs during February pointed to a marked increase in the presence of enemy main force units in Thua Thien Province, especially near Phu Bai. At the end of the month, Colonel Fisher, the 3d Marines commander, reported, "For the first time since the occupation of the Hue/Phu Bai TAOR, there appears to be considerable enemy interest in that area."<sup>4</sup> He believed a general Communist main force buildup was in progress. Marine intelligence sources in mid and late February identified two VC regiments, the *1st Provisional* and the *6th VC*, reinforced by two separate battalions, the *803d* and the already identified *810th*, within striking distance or 35 miles of Phu Bai. These same reports indicated that the enemy was planning to attack the Marine base at the beginning of March.<sup>5</sup>

Reacting to this intelligence, the Marine command refined its plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai and for the possible activation of a battalion-sized task unit, under Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin, at the base. This task unit, designated Hotel, would have the mission of supporting the hard-pressed ARVN 1st Division. Hanifin would be given operational control of two additional infantry companies which were to arrive from either Da Nang or Chu Lai or both. These companies would provide the 2d Battalion commander enough forces to defend the Phu Bai base area in the event Task Unit Hotel was ac-

tivated and committed outside the TAOR. Other plans called for further reinforcement.<sup>6</sup>

With the approval of Brigadier General English, acting 3d Marine Division commander in the absence of General Walt, who was still on leave, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin on 26 February activated Task Unit Hotel, "for the purpose of providing a reserve for CG 1st ARVN Division."<sup>7</sup> At this time, the 1st Division was committed to three operations and thinly spread. In Lam Son-234, the Vietnamese were operating in Quang Dien District northwest of Hue and called for Marine assistance. On the afternoon of 26 February, Hanifin attended a briefing at 1st ARVN Division Headquarters at Hue and Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st Division's commanding general, assigned the Marine battalion an objective area in the Pho Lai village complex, some seven kilometers northwest of Hue. According to allied intelligence, a 100-man local force VC company was in the vicinity of the village.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Phu Bai, Hanifin hurriedly made his plans for the operation, codenamed New York. He assembled, under Task Unit Hotel, three infantry companies, Companies F and G from his own battalion, and Company K from the 3d Marines. The 3d Marines company and Company F from the 9th Marines had arrived at Phu Bai that day from Da Nang. This reinforcement permitted Hanifin to leave three companies behind to cover the base area together with most of the Marine artillery. One Marine battery, the provisional 155mm towed-howitzer battery from the 4th Battalion, had already been committed to Lam Son-234 since 21 February and was in position to provide general support to Task Unit Hotel.<sup>9</sup>

The first phase of Operation New York went as planned except the enemy simply was not in the objective area. Companies F and G of the 2d Battalion moved by truck into jumpoff positions southwest of Pho Lai, arriving at their destination in the late afternoon and early evening of 26 February. About the same time, HMM-163 brought Company K, 3d Marines into blocking positions northeast of the village. Establishing his command group with Companies F and G that evening, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin ordered the two companies into the attack. Companies F and G advanced through Pho Lai without opposition and reached Company K's blocking positions at 2215 that night. Task Unit Hotel remained in the Pho Lai vicinity through the next mor-

ning, but failed to encounter any enemy. The Marine units of Task Unit Hotel were back at Phu Bai by 1815 on the 27th.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin and Task Unit Hotel were to have little rest. An hour and a half after his return to Phu Bai, Hanifin received another call for assistance from General Chuan. The 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment and a small group of Popular Force and Regional Force troops had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* on the supposedly pacified Phu Thu Peninsula located almost immediately to the east of the Phu Bai TAOR. After returning from another briefing at 1st Division Headquarters and receiving permission from III MAF, Hanifin decided to order at 2100 a night helicopter landing of the same forces that he had used in the Pho Lai village area to relieve the pressure on the South Vietnamese battalion. He realized that his men were not fresh, "but they were all that was available. The anticipation of engagement with a VC force boxed in on a peninsula overcame physical handicaps on the part of the troops."<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel House's HMM-163 landed the three infantry companies of Task Unit Hotel into landing zones just north of the peninsula, completing the entire helilift at 0200 the next morning. Supported by the Marine artillery at Phu Bai on 28 February, Companies F, G, and K advanced abreast toward the southeast. While the South Vietnamese blocking forces from the 1st Battalion moved into position on the enemy's flanks, the Marine com-

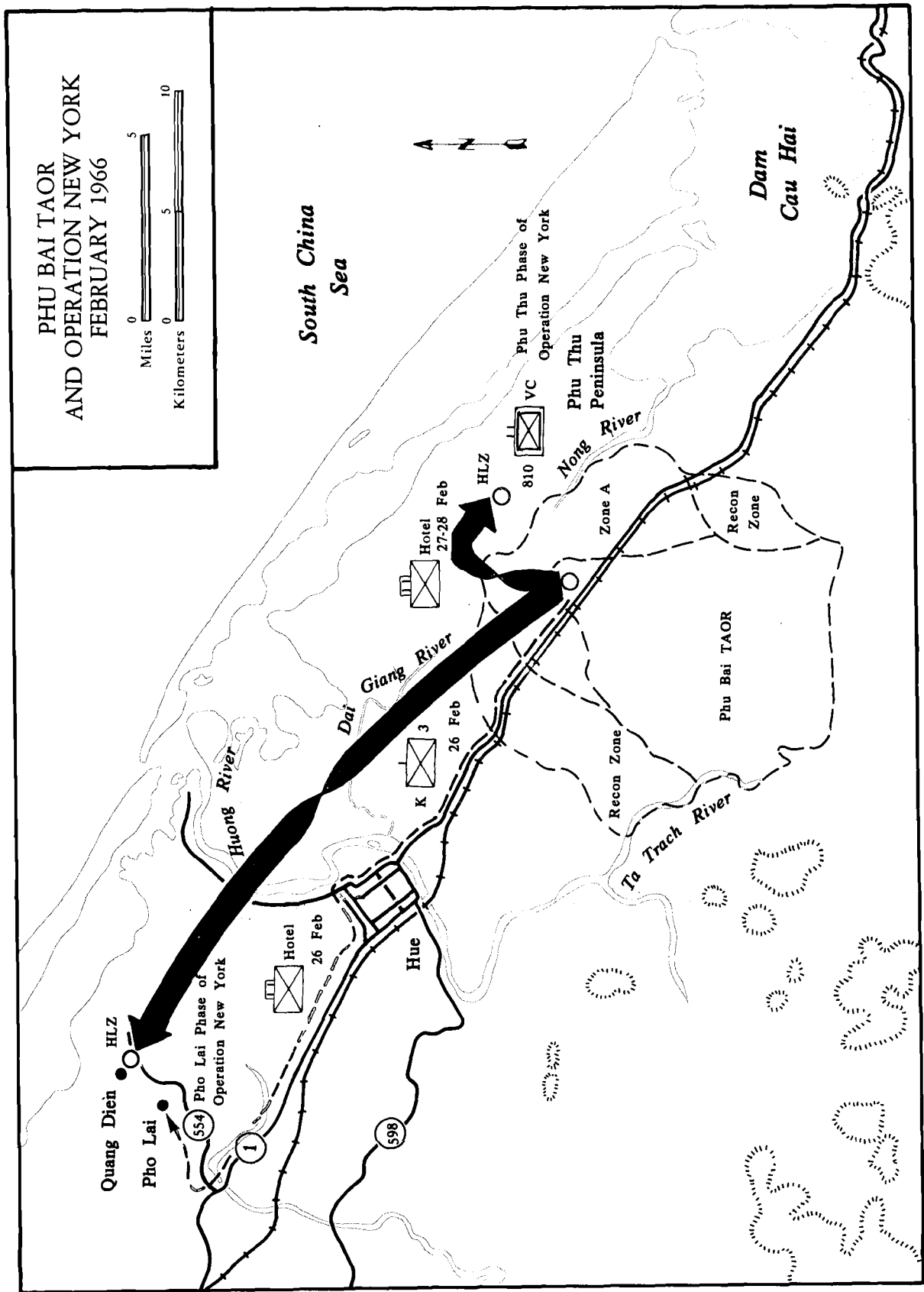
panies made a frontal assault against the well-prepared VC defenses, "at which time the VC broke contact and withdrew in small disorganized groups." The Marines continued the cleanup phase of the operation, meeting occasional enemy resistance, until 3 March. Task Unit Hotel during the one-week operation, also called New York, killed 120 of the enemy, captured 7 more, and seized 69 weapons. The Marines suffered casualties of 17 dead and 37 wounded.<sup>11</sup>

While the Marines conducted Operation New York on the Phu Thu Peninsula, evidence of a growing enemy presence in southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces continued to mount. In Lam Son-235, 1st ARVN Division units operating east and south of Quang Tri City accounted for over 240 enemy troops, but sustained losses of 23 killed and 158 wounded, including two U.S. advisors, through the end of February. Further south, Communist main force troops on 28 February ambushed a 1st Division unit conducting Operation Lam Son-236 in Phong Dien District of Thua Thien Province, 17 miles north of Hue. As a result of this action, the South Vietnamese suffered casualties of 15 killed and 22 wounded, and lost 56 weapons. Closer to Phu Bai, an ARVN unit reported contact on 1 March with a small Communist force at the Truoi River Bridge on Route 1, six miles south of where Task Unit Hotel had engaged the *810th VC Battalion* the day before. Other intelligence revealed that a VC company from the badly mauled *810th*, carrying its

*In Operation New York, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines advances on the enemy under cover of Marine air strikes. The Phu Bai-based Marines engaged the 810th VC Battalion on the Phu Thu Peninsula, located just east of the Marine base.*

Marine Corps Photo A186946







Marine Corps Photo 187628

*A Vietnamese student places a lei around the neck of a Marine from the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Phu Bai. The Vietnamese awarded their Cross of Gallantry to 32 Marines from the battalion for their participation in Operation New York.*

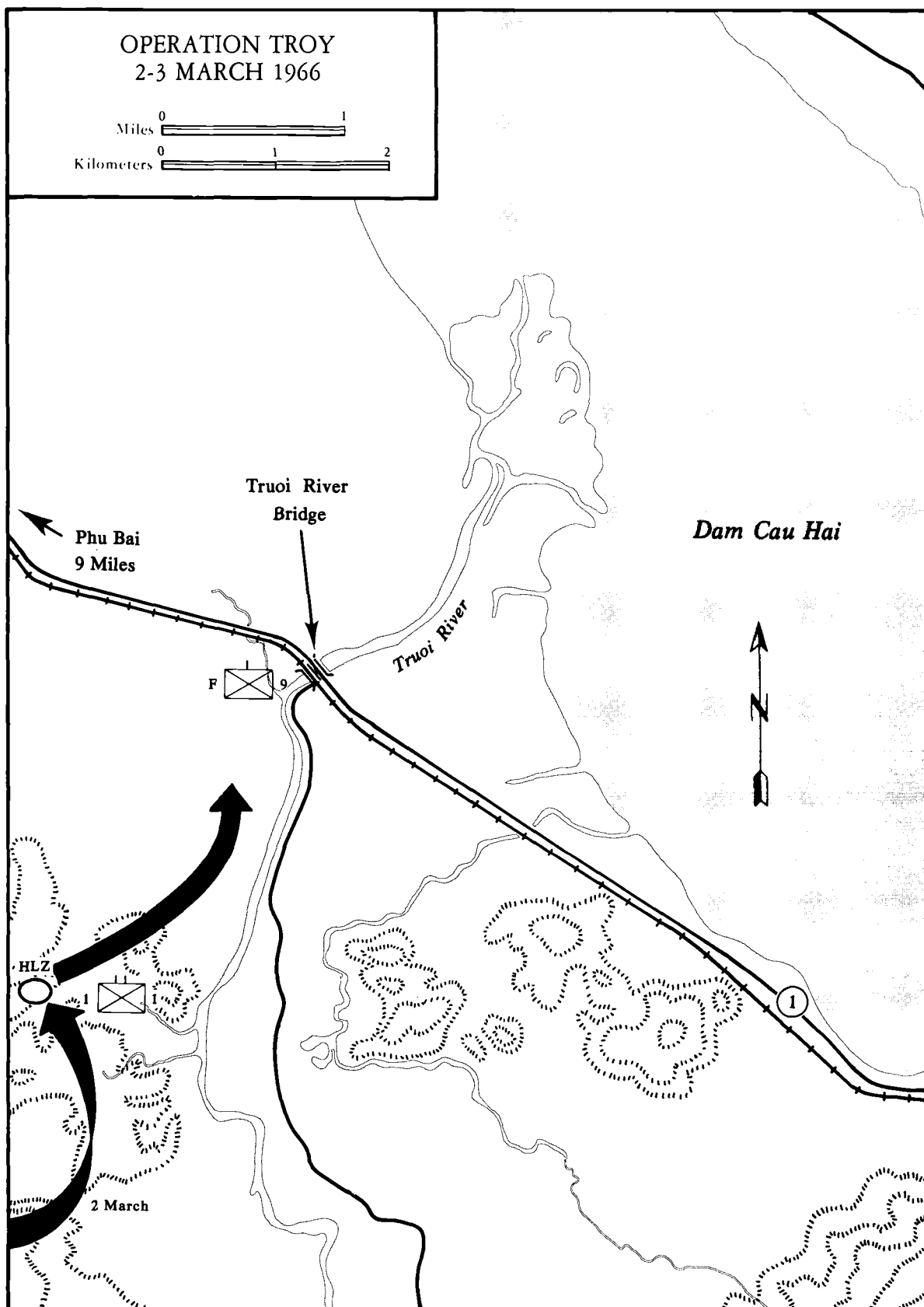
wounded, was moving toward Route 1 just north of the bridge.<sup>12</sup>

Influenced by the general buildup of enemy forces and also wanting to capitalize on the intelligence indicating that the remnants of the 810th were fleeing toward the Truoi Bridge, the Marine command decided to reinforce its northern enclave. While alerting additional units at both Da Nang and Chu Lai and with the concurrence of General McCutcheon, the acting CG III MAF, on March 1 General English ordered the deployment of his reserve battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, to Phu Bai. Company A of the 1st Battalion, which had only been relieved on line earlier that day, departed Da Nang on Marine fixed-wing transports at 1700 on 1 March. The following day, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, his command group, and Company C joined Company A at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher, the

3d Marines commander, also arrived at Phu Bai on 2 March to look over the situation.<sup>13</sup>

Upon his arrival at Phu Bai on 2 March, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch came under the operational control of the 3d Marines. Hoping to trap the retreating elements of the 810th, Colonel Fisher ordered Hatch to conduct an operation in the Phu Loc District of Thua Thien Province, southwest of the Phu Thu Peninsula and south of Route 1 and the Truoi River Bridge. One of the reserve companies of Task Unit Hotel at Phu Bai, Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, already had established blocking positions at the bridge the previous day. Assuming control of the 9th Marines company at the bridge and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch prepared his scheme of maneuver for a three-company operation. At 1230 on 2 March, one and a half hours after the battalion commander first received his orders, helicopters from HMM-163 inserted the 1st Battalion's command group, together with Company E of the 2d Battalion and Company C of the 1st Battalion, into a landing zone 3,000 meters south of Route 1. Remaining west of the Truoi River, the two companies advanced north without encountering any resistance toward the blocking positions of Company F at the bridge. With negligible results, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch closed out the operation, designated Troy, on 3 March, at about the same time Task Unit Hotel secured from Operation New York further north. The remaining elements of the 810th had made good their escape.<sup>14</sup>

During this time, Generals English and McCutcheon, after receiving Colonel Fisher's report on the enemy buildup in the area, decided to continue with the augmentation of the Phu Bai defenses. Colonel Fisher returned to Phu Bai at 0815 on 3 March with a small command group from the 3d Marines and established Task Group Foxtrot, assuming responsibility for the Phu Bai enclave. Task Group Foxtrot included both infantry battalions, the artillery battalion, and other supporting forces. Lieutenant Colonel Hatch had only a forward headquarters and two of his own infantry companies at Phu Bai, the rest of his command remaining at Da Nang. Hatch assumed operational control of Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines at Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin retained control of his four infantry companies and also Company F of the 9th Marines. Rounding out



the new reinforcements, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines arrived from Da Nang with six 105mm howitzers on the afternoon of 3 March and brought the number of artillery pieces under Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis to 30.<sup>15</sup>

Although intelligence reports continued to speak of a buildup of VC forces near Hue and the likelihood of an attack against the Phu Bai base, the enemy remained quiescent for the next few days. Task Group Foxtrot spent the time consolidating its defenses and planning the extension of the Phu Bai TAOR.

The Marines were confident that they were in control of the situation. On 4 March, General McCutcheon radioed General Krulak that III MAF in Operation New York and the ARVN 1st Division in Operations Lam Son-234, -235, and -236 had killed over 700 of the enemy. Comparing these operations to the French experience in Vietnam, McCutcheon observed:

This overall campaign took place essentially in the area of the "Street without Joy" where the French in 1953 used about 20 battalions against a Viet Minh Regiment. Contrary to their actions we and the ARVN used about 8 battalions to engage about 6 VC battalions and of these the 806th, 808th, and 810th Battalions were rather severely mauled. Although it was not a perfect operation by any manner or means it did result in victory.<sup>16</sup>

McCutcheon concluded:

Furthermore, I believe it substantiates our concept and strategy that the primary battleground is close to the sea because that is where the people are and the people are the primary object for both sides . . . we can act swiftly in strength to good intelligence and engage the enemy on our own terms rather than merely react to his actions or waste our efforts beating the bushes in the hinterlands chasing shadows.<sup>17</sup>

McCutcheon's message touched on the continuing debate between MACV and III MAF concerning offensive operations. Since returning from the Honolulu Conference, General Westmoreland placed even more pressure on his command to take the offensive against the enemy main force units. At a high-level MACV commander's conference on 20 February, Westmoreland told the assembled officers that the U.S. had enough troops in Vietnam to step up the tempo of operations "by going out after the Viet Cong rather than sitting around base areas."<sup>18</sup> On 3 March, Westmoreland visited General McCutcheon at Da Nang and reiterated that 50 to 75 percent of the Marine units should be engaged with the

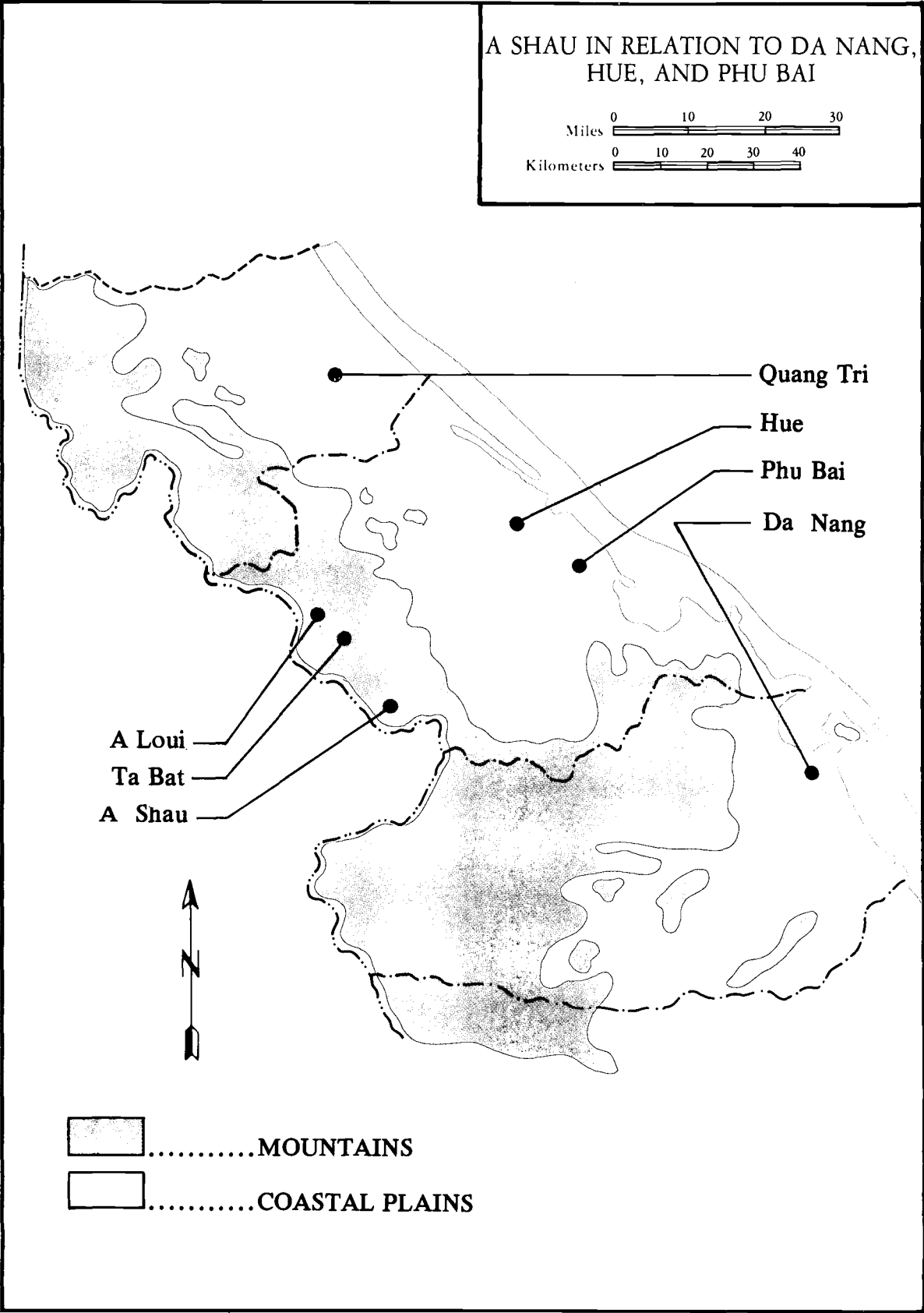
enemy at all times and to "Leave defense of bases to logistic and headquarters types."<sup>19</sup> McCutcheon succinctly defined the MACV philosophy as "defend less and attack more . . ."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the Marines countered that they were "indeed, on the offensive," pursuing simultaneously their antiguerrilla campaign and large unit actions. They promised to redouble their efforts to demonstrate that they were "doing more offensive work per capita than anybody else and, moreover, that it . . . [was] being done on a balanced basis with some tangible results to show" for their effort.<sup>21</sup> Despite all of the talk of the offensive, the American command, as evidenced by the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, was largely reacting to unforeseen circumstances and the corresponding buildup of the enemy's forces.

### *The Fall of A Shau*

While the Marines reinforced their Phu Bai forces in response to what they perceived as a major buildup in eastern Thua Thien Province, the 95th NVA Regiment completed its preparations for an attack on the isolated A Shau Special Forces outpost in western Thua Thien, some 33 miles southwest of Phu Bai. Manned by a U.S. Special Forces detachment and a South Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG),\* this allied camp was ideally situated to monitor enemy movement through the A Shau Valley. The valley, itself, was a major Communist infiltration route about two miles from and parallel to the Laotian border. Surrounded by steep, jungle-covered mountains, this key artery extended along a northwest-southeast axis for about 15 miles. One branch ran westward and joined the elaborate Ho Chi Minh Trail network. Other tributary trails led eastward from A Shau through the mountains into the populated area around Hue and Phu Bai. During 1965, the allies had manned three CIDG bases in the valley, A Loui, Ta Bat, and A Shau. The South Vietnamese had abandoned two of the camps, A Loui and Ta Bat, on 8 December 1965, leaving only the A Shau base in the southern portion of the valley, 13 miles south of A Loui and eight miles south of Ta Bat.

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\*The CIDG forces, mostly Montagnards, the nomadic tribes which populate South Vietnam's highlands, normally manned the isolated outposts along the borders and were advised by U.S. Army Special Forces.



In late February and early March, the A Shau garrison obtained intelligence on the presence of the *95th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* in the area. On 28 February, the Special Forces captured an NVA soldier who had maintained a diary. According to the soldier's account, the NVA regiment had left "the friendly country," probably a reference to North Vietnam, on 29 December 1965. Seven days later, 5 January 1966, the unit arrived in the A Shau. Through January and February, enemy patrols reconnoitered the Special Forces camp. The prisoner recorded in his diary that on two occasions, he "had crawled through the first row of barbed wires, surrounding the camp."<sup>22</sup> On 5 March, two more North Vietnamese soldiers surrendered to the A Shau defenders. Claiming to be officers from the *325th NVA Division*, the two deserters reported that the enemy planned to attack the A Shau Camp on 11 or 12 March.<sup>23</sup>

Reacting to this intelligence, the A Shau CIDG commander asked the South Vietnamese I Corps command for reinforcements. With the 1st Division spread thin in eastern Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and the 2d ARVN Division heavily engaged in Quang Ngai Province, the South Vietnamese had few if any additional forces to send to the isolated outpost. From Nha Trang, the commanding officer of the 5th U.S. Special Forces Group (Airborne) committed one of his mobile strike force companies to A Shau. It arrived at the base on 7 March and increased the allied defenders' strength to approximately 400 men.<sup>24\*</sup>

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\*Mobile strike forces were small battalion-size units used as reserve or reaction forces. Each mobile strike force consisted of a headquarters and three companies, a total strength of 594 men. The mobile forces were trained to a tactical competence beyond that of a regular CIDG company. A detachment of U.S. Special Forces troops was normally assigned to the strike force. See Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces*, p. 92. There is no evidence that the Special Forces called upon III MAF for reinforcements prior to the attack and the command relations between the Marines and the Special Forces were rather tenuous. General Simmons recalled: "Westmoreland specifically told Walt that he had authority and responsibility over and for the outposts and the Special Forces. However, the Special Forces covertly resisted this authority." BGen Edwin H. Simmons, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9Sep74 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, recalled in 1978 that he was never overly impressed with the military efficiency of the Special Forces and "never too sure of the accuracy of their intelligence reports or combat action reports." Col Roy C. Gray, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 20July78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Believing that an attack was imminent, the A Shau garrison commander on the night of 8 March placed the camp on a general alert. At 0300 on the early morning of the 9th, the North Vietnamese opened up with a heavy two-and-one-half hour mortar barrage, inflicting 50 casualties on the defenders and destroying several buildings. Under cover of the mortar attack, two enemy companies probed the camp's southern defenses with the apparent mission of cutting through the wire and determining the camp's firepower. Throughout the remainder of the day, the enemy continued pressure on the base, but refrained from launching a full-scale ground assault.<sup>25</sup>

A Shau was beyond the range of friendly artillery, enabling the enemy to take full advantage of the weather and surrounding mountains. A heavy ground fog shrouded the valley and a 100-foot cloud ceiling limited the effectiveness of allied air support. The nearest Marine Air Support Radar Team (ASRT), equipped with TPQ-10 radar, was at Da Nang, 60 miles away and out of range. Ground controllers could not conduct radar bombing missions around the perimeter. General McCutcheon, the wing commander, directed the Chu Lai ASRT to deploy to Phu Bai, where on subsequent days it was able to provide TPQ support for the camp.<sup>26</sup>

North Vietnamese gunners, on the 9th, shot down an Air Force AC-47 "Puff the Magic Dragon" ground support plane. An Air Force helicopter was able to rescue three of the crewmen from the wreckage at the crash site north of A Shau.

While weather hampered the fixed-wing pilots on the first day of fighting, a few helicopters were able to reach the camp. Two Marine helicopter crews, on search and rescue alert at the small Quang Tri City airstrip, took off for A Shau to evacuate wounded. The two UH-34s from HMM-363, piloted by Lieutenants Richard A. Vasdias and David E. Brust, respectively, skimmed under the overcast. When it attempted to land at the camp, Vasdias' aircraft was hit in the oil line and crashed within the compound. Brust quickly touched down, picked up the downed Marine crewmen, and flew to Marble Mountain Air Facility at Da Nang. The crashed helicopter was later destroyed by U.S. forces.

Shortly after noon on the 9th, the A Shau defenders radioed: "We suspect we are heavily infiltrated, don't think the camp will last the night without reinforcement."<sup>27</sup> At this point, I Corps in-



formed III MAF that a CIDG company would arrive at Phu Bai from Nha Trang to be helilifted into A Shau. The Marines also placed two companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on alert at Phu Bai, but also told the I Corps command not to expect any helicopter support unless the weather conditions cleared up.<sup>28</sup>

That afternoon, Brigadier General Marion E. Carl, the assistant wing commander and one of the Marine Corps' first helicopter pilots, flew his own UH-1E from Da Nang to Phu Bai. According to Carl, he then discussed the A Shau situation with Lieutenant Colonel House, the HMM-163 commander.<sup>29</sup> House later commented that General Carl stopped off at Phu Bai to refuel his aircraft, but did not talk to him. The squadron commander remarked in 1978, "We anticipated commitment, so recon'd the route."<sup>30</sup> In any event, General Carl took off from Phu Bai to look over the objective area for himself. He later recalled that the weather "would come down, go up, go down . . ."<sup>31</sup> At 1500, III MAF informed MACV that the helilift of the CIDG company into A Shau would begin at 1620, but shortly afterward had to postpone the lift because of the weather and the enemy's concentrated antiaircraft guns surrounding the camp. By 1700, it was clear that the reinforcements could not be flown in that

evening. All the Marines at this point could accomplish was to monitor the radio communications and prepare plans for the next morning.<sup>32</sup>

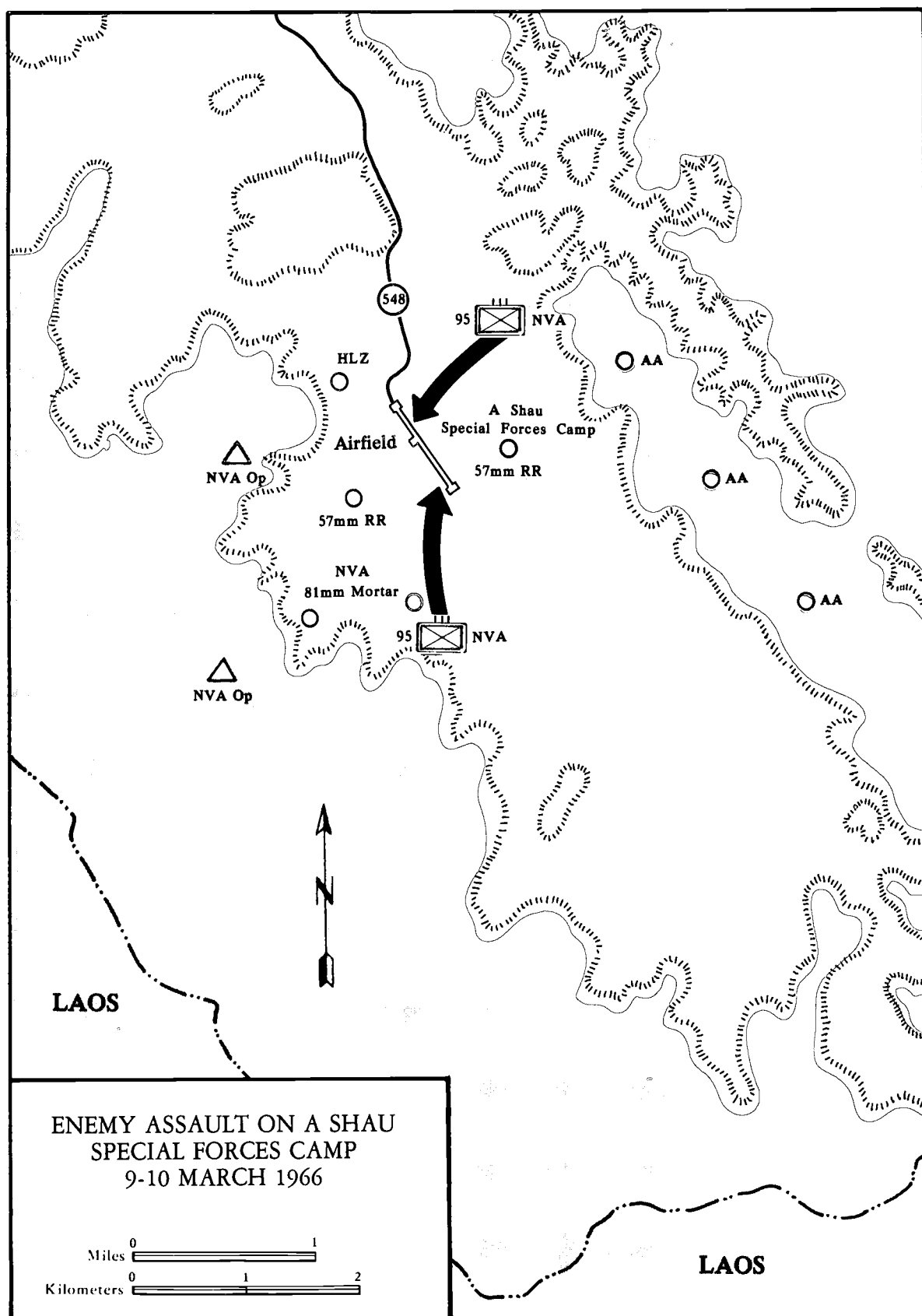
In the early morning hours of 10 March, the North Vietnamese began their final assaults on the besieged camp. Initiating the action at 0400 with an intensive mortar and recoilless rifle bombardment which lasted for about an hour, the enemy followed up with a heavy ground attack which breached the southern and eastern defenses. With the enemy troops surging into the compound, the defenders either retreated across the runway into the communications bunker or into hastily-built fighting positions along the northern wall. Some of the South Vietnamese irregulars fought bravely while others surrendered en masse to the North Vietnamese. According to Captain John D. Blair IV, USA, the Special Forces detachment leader, the CIDG camp commander hid "in various bunkers making no effort to lead or command during the entire battle." At 1000, Blair requested that the camp with the exception of the communication bunker and the northern wall be bombed and strafed.<sup>33</sup>

Despite heavy cloud cover and the steep mountains surrounding the valley, Marine and U.S. Air Force aircraft had been providing close air support since the early morning. In one of the missions, the

*An aerial view of the A Shau Special Forces Camp near the Laotian border in western Thua Thien Province before the assault on the camp by the 95th NVA Regiment. The surrounding mountains combined with heavy clouds to hinder allied relief and evacuation efforts.*

U.S. Air Force Photo 96256





Marines lost an A-4 Skyhawk from MAG-12. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Augusto M. Xavier, the leader of a two-plane flight from Chu Lai, arrived over the camp in predawn darkness and ordered his wingman to orbit above the cloud cover. Xavier descended through the overcast under the glow of parachute flares dropped by an Air Force C-123. He maneuvered his Skyhawk around the mountains and made a low-level bombing pass on the enemy positions. In the face of heavy ground fire, he made a second pass, this time strafing the NVA with 20mm cannon fire. Xavier failed to pull out and crashed into the side of a mountain. For his actions, Lieutenant Xavier was posthumously awarded the Silver Star. The commander of MAG-12, Colonel Leslie E. Brown, later commented: "Xavier's performance on this mission might indeed be termed a classic in an aviator's determination to support the man on the ground."<sup>34</sup>

An Air Force aircraft was also lost while supporting the camp on 10 March, but the pilot was saved in an unusual rescue. Major Bernard F. Fisher from the 1st Air Commando Squadron at Pleiku led a flight of Douglas A-1E Skyraiders over A Shau. One of the Skyraiders, piloted by Major Dafford W. Myers, suffered heavy damage from ground fire. Major Myers made a forced landing on the dirt strip at A Shau and escaped seconds before the plane exploded. Major Fisher immediately called for a rescue helicopter, but then saw that the air strip below him was swarming with enemy soldiers. He then decided to rescue the downed pilot himself. Fisher landed his A-1E on the shell-cratered runway and Myers quickly scrambled into the cockpit with him. While the NVA fired at the aircraft, Fisher gunned his engine and successfully took off. For his action, Major Fisher was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

Despite the heroics of the Marine and Air Force aviators, the situation on the ground for the A Shau defenders continued to deteriorate. Shortly after noon, they radioed "Need reinforcements—without them kiss us goodbye," and 20 minutes later sent the message "Do not have area where they can land reinforcements."<sup>35</sup> The options open to the allied command in response to these appeals were limited. Given the miserable weather, marginal flying conditions, mountainous terrain, and concentrated enemy antiaircraft and ground strength in the area, the helilifting of reinforcements into the camp was now out of the question. Two choices remained: to at-

tempt a helicopter evacuation of the trapped garrison, or to tell the defenders to break out and escape the best they could.

Later in the afternoon of 10 March, General Walt, recently promoted to lieutenant general and just back from leave, chaired an emergency meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the A Shau situation. All of Walt's senior officers were present at the conference; Lieutenant General John A. Heintges, Deputy Commander, USMACV, represented General Westmoreland, and General Chuan was the Vietnamese I Corps command representative. Brigadier General Carl, who earlier in the day had made another reconnaissance flight over A Shau in his UH-1E and, in fact, had been 20-minutes' flying time from A Shau when Major Fisher made his dramatic rescue, recommended the immediate evacuation of the camp. Having witnessed the low overcast and heavy antiaircraft fire in the area, he warned that the Marines stood the chance of losing one out of every four helicopters in the evacuation attempt but believed "we could not abandon the troops encircled there."<sup>36</sup> Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the 1st Wing operations officer, who was also at the meeting, remembered:

The weather was lousy and there was not too much daylight left for an evacuation attempt. . . . Everything considered it was decided to have HMM-163 make an attempt to get under the weather into the valley for one last attempt. As I recall we merely called the Phu Bai squadron on the land line phone and asked them to give it a try, explaining the situation as best we could and advising that if the Special Forces types had to "bug out" they would be outside the camp over the north wall.<sup>37\*</sup>

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\*As previously noted, General Carl and Lieutenant Colonel House have differing recollections on the events that led to the decision to order the helicopter evacuation of the camp. General Carl recalled that on the morning of the 10th he had stopped off at Phu Bai and discussed with Lieutenant Colonel House the feasibility of flying into the Special Forces camp. According to Carl, House responded that the weather had not improved and recommended against any further flights into the valley, but "would make the effort if so ordered." Carl then took off in his UH-1E and made his own reconnaissance of the area. Carl Comments, 1969. Lieutenant Colonel House, on the other hand, denied that he had any discussion with General Carl on 10 March. According to House, "I was told to go by Wing G-3, but said I would only go if ordered by the Wing Commander. Later, I received another call, 'It's an order.'" LtCol Charles A. House, Comments on drafts MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

At A Shau, the defenders on the 10th continued to hold out the best they could. Under cover of the American air support, Captain Blair's forces made several unsuccessful counterattacks on North Vietnamese positions on the southern wall, but finally had to give up the attempt to dislodge the heavily entrenched enemy. At 1415, American aircraft broke up an enemy concentration east of the camp, but the North Vietnamese continued to place heavy fire on the allied defenders on the northern wall and in the communication bunker. By 1500, the end was in sight. According to Blair's account, "Almost all friendly crew-served weapons were destroyed. Very little ammunition remained. No food and water had been available for 36 hours."<sup>38</sup> At 1530, the defenders received word that the Marine helicopters would arrive in about an hour and a half to take them out. At approximately 1730, Blair ordered the evacuation of the camp and the establishment of a helicopter landing zone, about 300 meters north of the camp. The plan was for the able-bodied Special Forces troops and the irregulars to fight a rearguard action while the wounded were placed first on the aircraft.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after 1730, Lieutenant Colonel House led 16 UH-34s from his squadron, supported by six UH-1Es from VMO-2 and fixed-wing aircraft, into the valley. According to one account, a North Vietnamese machine gun on a hill just north of A Shau opened fire on House's aircraft as he approached the camp. Veering away from the fire, the squadron commander, "noticed the survivors pouring over the parapets on the north side. . . ."<sup>40</sup> House then turned around and began his descent into the improvised landing zone.

There was chaos on the ground. The South Vietnamese irregulars had panicked and abandoned the wounded. They clambered over one another in order to get into the helicopter. House later stated in a television interview: "So many people wanted to get out, they hung on the cables, almost pulled the helicopters into the zone." Attempting to create a semblance of order, the Special Forces troops clubbed some of the able-bodied South Vietnamese off the aircraft with their rifle butts. When this failed, the Americans fired into the hysterical men. House observed during the television interview:

. . . it was a hell of a thing to have to do; some of them had to be shot in order to maintain control. . . . I know of no other answers in a case of this nature. It was either that or

sacrifice everybody. That's the only decision to be made.<sup>41\*</sup>

As House's aircraft began to rise, a North Vietnamese recoilless rifle round struck its tail section, causing the helicopter to crash 200 meters from the landing zone. House and his crew then joined the Special Forces on the ground. The North Vietnamese also shot down House's wingman, 1st Lieutenant William J. Gregory. Gregory, his copilot, and crew chief survived and made their way to another helicopter, but the gunner was forced to hide in the bush. In addition to the two downed aircraft, three Marine F-4Bs, two A-4s, two UH-1Es, and three other UH-34s sustained damage, but returned to Phu Bai. With approaching darkness and deteriorating weather, the wing halted the evacuation of the camp. Only one flight had been able to get into the landing zone, but the helicopters succeeded in taking out 69 of the defenders, including four of the U.S. Army advisors.<sup>42</sup>

With the end of the evacuation attempt on the 10th, the survivors of the camp escaped into the jungle to avoid capture. Lieutenant Colonel House took command of a ragtag group, including his crew, the gunner from Gregory's aircraft, South Vietnamese irregulars, and Army advisors. Shortly after noon on the 11th, Marine pilots from HMM-163, searching for the evacuees, spotted House and his men in a small clearing, approximately 3,000 meters northwest of the previous landing zone. As the helicopters landed, there was once more difficulty with the CIDG, who rushed pell-mell to get on board the aircraft. House later claimed that the Special Forces had to shoot about 13 of the irregulars.<sup>43</sup> The Special Forces, on the other hand, denied killing any of the South Vietnamese, but declared they and some of the CIDG maintained

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\*The evidence is unclear who initiated and took part in the shooting of the Vietnamese troops. House declared in the aforementioned interview that the Special Forces troops took the initiative: "They knew the men more and they were well aware that was the only way the situation could be solved." See Transcript of Intvw, Current News, dtd 15Mar66, p. 4. The Special Forces, on the other hand, reported that Lieutenant Colonel House ordered his crew to shoot the Vietnamese. See 5th Special Forces Group AAR, Battle for A Shau, dtd 28Mar66 (Acc. No. 69A729). In a message to Washington, MACV declared that the helicopter crew chief and a Special Forces sergeant were involved in the shooting of the CIDG. See ComUSMACV msg to SecDef OASD PA, dtd 16 Mar66 (III MAF Msg & Jnl Files).

control, "by using butt strokes and firing" in front of the feet of the terror-stricken men.<sup>44</sup> The UH-34s succeeded in taking out about 60 of the group, including House, six other Marines, and one Special Forces soldier.<sup>45</sup>

On the following morning, seven aircraft from HMM-163 and two from VMO-2 flew through extensive ground fire and evacuated 34 more survivors, including two Marine crewmen and five Army advisors. On the ground, the CIDG panicked and fought among themselves. One of the South Vietnamese threw a grenade, killing 10 of the struggling troops. According to the Special Forces, "U.S. personnel . . . witnessed the action, but did not participate in the shooting."<sup>46</sup> All of the Marine aircraft returned safely to Phu Bai, but many sustained severe damage. Captain Wilbur C. McMinn, Jr. nursed his crippled UH-34 back to base with 126 bullet holes in the aircraft. According to Lieutenant Colonel House, 21 of the 24 helicopters of this squadron eventually had to be replaced as a result of the three-day evacuation operation.<sup>47</sup>

Following House's return to Phu Bai, CBS Correspondent John Laurence conducted an interview with the squadron commander that appeared on national television and caused some furor. In addition, syndicated columnist Jim Lucas wrote an article relating to the performance of the CIDG troops at A Shau. At the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, MACV and III MAF completed an investigation into the "unfavorable TV and press releases in the U.S. . . ."<sup>48</sup> Lieutenant Colonel House had the dubious distinction of receiving a Navy Cross and a letter of reprimand for his part in the A Shau evacuation. According to General Carl, who presided over the investigation, House's difficulty arose out of his statement to the press.<sup>49</sup> Colonel Thomas J. O'Connor, commanding officer of MAG-16 and House's immediate superior, wrote in 1978:

I had flown with Chuck House on several missions and knew him to be a dedicated Marine. Unfortunately upon his return from A Shau he made some rather emotionally charged statements to authority about the wisdom and futility of the mission, thus the anomalous results of both a citation and disciplinary action.<sup>50</sup>

Colonel Roy C. Gray, Jr., the wing G-3, recalled that Lieutenant Colonel House in conversation with both reporters and with senior commanders "ex-



Marine Corps Photo A194536  
*LtCol Charles A. House, the commander of HMM-163, whose helicopter was shot down during the evacuation of A Shau, poses at Phu Bai with U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers and South Vietnamese irregulars who survived the enemy overrunning of the base. Capt John D. Blair IV, USA, who commanded the Special Forces detachment is to the right of LtCol House.*

pressed considerable bitterness and criticism of the Wing and how the mission was handled." Gray then declared that House was "probably right, but in retrospect I don't know what else there was to do except either forget A Shau or make an attempt for the pickup of survivors as was done."<sup>51</sup>

With the end of the helicopter evacuation of A Shau on 12 March, those survivors who escaped the enemy attack and missed the airlift had little choice but to try to make the long trek over the mountains to friendly lines. For the allies, the battle had been costly. In addition to aircraft lost during the fighting, 248 out of the total garrison of 434 were either missing or dead, including five U.S. Special Forces soldiers. Marine helicopters, mostly from HMM-163, flew 131 sorties from 9-12 March and brought back 161 of the 186 survivors, including 10 of the 12 Army advisors who got out. The fall of the A Shau Camp opened the way for increased enemy infiltration of men and material through the valley into central I Corps.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Aftermath of A Shau*

During and immediately after the fall of A Shau, the allied commanders in I Corps evaluated the idea of launching a combined operation into the valley. On the morning of 10 March, General Chuan, the 1st Division commander, gave serious consideration to the insertion of one of the I Corps reserve battalions, reinforced by Marines, to relieve the embattled garrison. With one battalion, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on three-hour alert at Phu Bai since 9 March, III MAF on 10 March placed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines on one-hour standby at Chu Lai for possible air movement to Phu Bai.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the decision of the meeting at III MAF Headquarters on the afternoon of the 10th not to send infantry reinforcements into A Shau, the Marines continued to maintain the two battalions on an alert status and strengthened the forces at Phu Bai. At 2000 on the 10th, the rear elements of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines at Da Nang, hampered by rain and darkness, began loading their equipment on 41 trucks for movement to Phu Bai. The truck convoy departed Da Nang at 0630 on the 11th and arrived at its destination at 1330 that afternoon. The following night, III MAF ordered the deployment of the battalion command group and two companies of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, the battalion commander, his headquarters, and his Companies A and B arrived at Phu Bai by KC-130 transports on 13 March. Colonel Fisher, Commanding Officer, Task Group Foxtrot, now had the principal elements of three Marine infantry battalions under his command at Phu Bai.<sup>54</sup>

During the next few days, the South Vietnamese pressed for a large search and destroy operation in the A Shau Valley and the reestablishment of a Special Forces camp in the area. On 15 March, General Chuan, who had just relieved General Thi as a result of a falling out between Thi and Premier Ky, urged the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff to intercede with MACV for such a course of action. Explaining that he already had committed most of his reserve forces into strategic areas near Hue that were now threatened because of the fall of the camp, Chuan wanted the Marines to make up the bulk of the attacking forces into the A Shau Valley itself.<sup>55</sup>

Despite Chuan's recommendation, the allied commanders finally rejected the idea of a direct

assault at this time into the valley. Both Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, now at Phu Bai with the two companies of his battalion, remembered that their units remained on alert for several days for an operation into the valley. Sullivan described A Shau "as a place for disasters to occur in . . ." and recalled:

After an aerial recon, and talking to Chuck House and others, I became convinced that if two bob-tailed battalions were to be sent into A Shau, that someone had better have a string on a regiment in case we stepped in defecation. Fisher agreed, and the operation was called off.<sup>56</sup>

American and South Vietnamese intelligence during this period continued to show a buildup of enemy units in the two northern provinces. The U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division reported to General Walt that despite the relative quiet in the division's sector, the available intelligence indicated the movement of enemy units and the possibility of a major enemy campaign in the northern two provinces. He pointed to an enemy regiment with three battalions massing near Quang Tri City and another two battalions, the 802d and 804th of the 1st VC Provisional Regiment, in the Co Bi Thanh Tan area about 15 miles west of Hue, and moving toward Route 1 and the coast. As yet, the allied commanders had no hard evidence of the intentions of the 95th Regiment, which had just overrun the A Shau Camp.<sup>57</sup>

In order to obtain such information, the South Vietnamese brought into I Corps a special long-range reconnaissance group called Project Delta. The Project Delta forces consisted of six-man reconnaissance teams made up of four South Vietnamese Special Forces troops and two U.S. Army Special Forces advisors; five-man CIDG road patrols, nicknamed "roadrunner" teams; and a reaction force of South Vietnamese Army ranger companies. From 17 March through 29 March a total of 10 Project Delta reconnaissance teams, 3 roadrunner teams, and 2 ranger companies shuttled in and out of an approximately 150-square-mile operating area extending southwest of Hue to the Quang Nam-Thua Thien border. Although not entering the A Shau Valley itself, the teams penetrated the most significant infiltration corridors leading from the valley into the coastal region. Enemy gunners shot down,

during the course of the inserts and extractions, two Army helicopters, and Communist antiaircraft fire forced the aborting of several missions. The reconnaissance teams spotted several enemy concentrations and called either artillery or air strikes on various occasions against such forces. Nevertheless, the teams accounted for only four confirmed enemy dead and one wounded. The results of the extended intelligence operation were tentative. Despite finding some enemy units, the teams obtained little evidence of a major NVA buildup in the area southwest of Hue. The North Vietnamese plans to exploit their A Shau victory remained obscure.<sup>58</sup>

### *Continuing Reinforcement of Phu Bai and Operation Oregon*

While the deliberations over returning to A Shau continued and the Project Delta forces operated southwest of Hue, General Walt made new plans for the reinforcement of Phu Bai. In a discussion on 12 March with Marine Brigadier General William K. Jones, the director of the MACV Command Center, whom General Westmoreland had sent to Da Nang to discuss the situation with III MAF, Walt declared that he decided to position four battalions permanently at Phu Bai. Two of the battalions would be from the Korean Marine Brigade, slated to arrive later in the spring.<sup>59</sup> Two days later, the III MAF commander began to implement his decision to build up his northern base. He ordered Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the commanding officer of the 4th Marines, whose headquarters personnel provided most of the staff for the Chu Lai ADC command group, to prepare to move his headquarters to Phu Bai and assume control of the TAOR from Task Group Foxtrot. At the same time, Walt requested the Seventh Fleet to land BLT 3/4, which had embarked on amphibious shipping on Okinawa for return to Vietnam, at Hue/Phu Bai instead of Da Nang as originally scheduled. The same ships would then be used to reembark Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's headquarters group and two companies for return to Chu Lai. When the ships arrived at Chu Lai, the 4th Marines Headquarters would then embark for movement to Phu Bai.<sup>60</sup>

On 19 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sumner A. Vale's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines debarked from amphibious shipping and arrived at Phu Bai, ending for the time being the intratheater battalion rotation

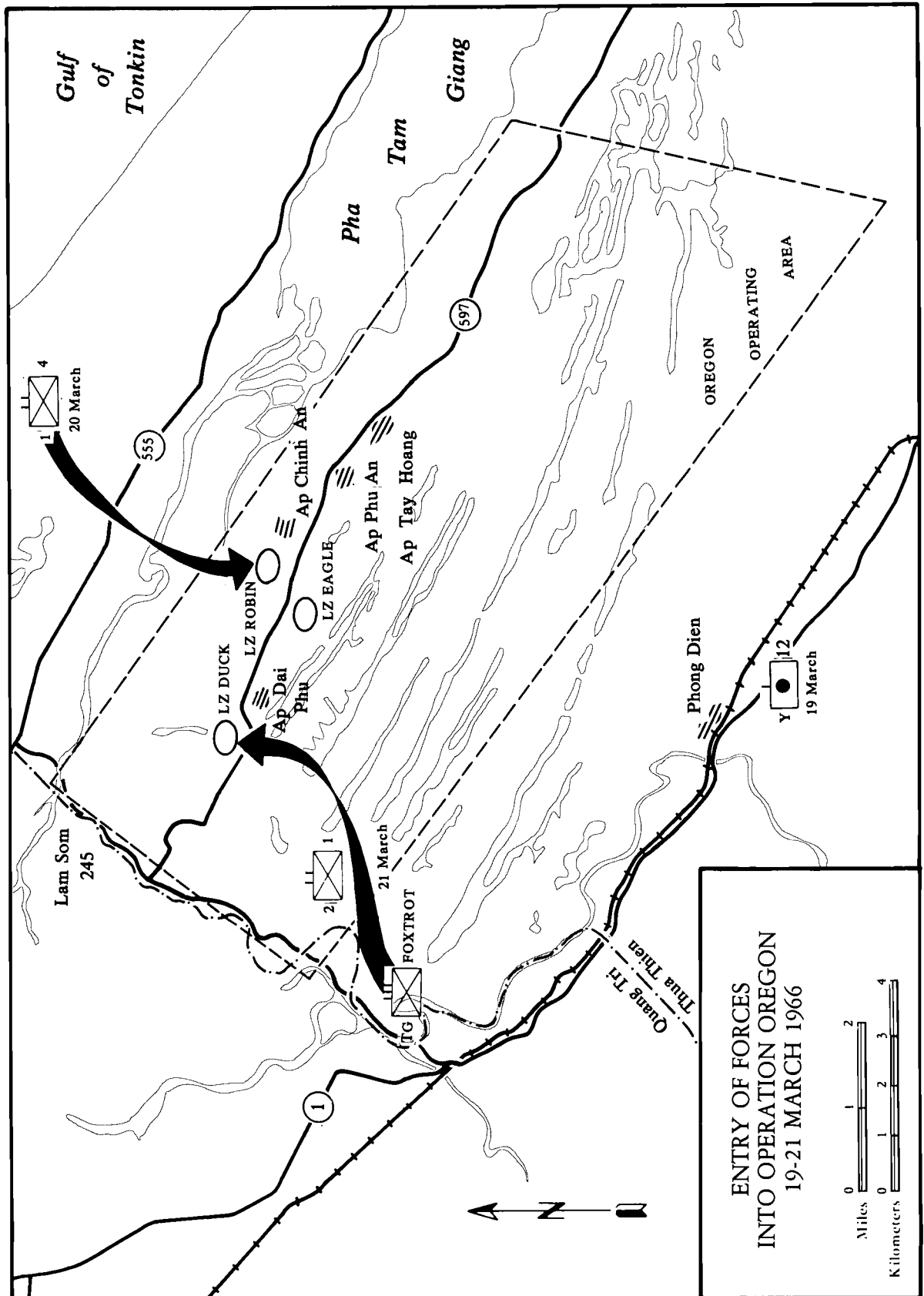
program between Okinawa and Vietnam. But once more events altered Marine plans. Instead of returning to Chu Lai with the arrival of the ships, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command was committed to an operation 20 miles north of Hue.

Earlier, on 17 March, General Chuan had requested III MAF to provide a Marine company for a combined operation with a South Vietnamese unit in an area south of Phong Dien, the district capital where the ARVN had killed about 50 enemy troops from the *804th VC Battalion*. General Walt, on the following day, directed Colonel Fisher, the Task Group Foxtrot commander, to make liaison with the ARVN 1st Division. That afternoon, Fisher visited the division headquarters in Hue where he learned that the target area was in the coastal plain between Route 1 and the sea some 8,000 meters north of Phong Dien, rather than south of the town as originally indicated.<sup>61</sup>

With the concurrence of Walt and the South Vietnamese, Colonel Fisher decided upon a battalion-size operation and to hold in reserve both a Marine and a South Vietnamese battalion. His plan for Oregon, as the operation was named, called for the helicopter insertion on the morning of 19 March of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and Companies A and B into two landing zones, designated Eagle and Robin, located north and south respectively of Route 597, which roughly paralleled Route 1. The two Marine companies were to advance to the southeast on either side of the road and clear the hamlets of Ap Phu An and Ap Tay Hoang, some 4,000 meters from the landing zones. Allied intelligence placed two companies of the *VC 802d Battalion* with some VC local force units at an approximate strength of 250 men in the two hamlets. If Sullivan's companies made contact with the enemy, Fisher planned to reinforce the battalion with Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and if need be with the 3d ARVN Regiment. Other ARVN units were conducting Lam Son-245 to the north and west of the proposed Marine area of operations. Marine air and artillery and Navy gunfire were available to support the Marine infantry.<sup>62</sup>

Delays plagued the operation from the very beginning. Heavy cloud cover, rain, and winds on 19 March forced Colonel Fisher to cancel the helilift of Sullivan's battalion and to reschedule it for the following morning. On the 20th, heavy fog caused the task group commander to hold up the helicopter







assault for two hours. At 1015, the helicopters from HMM-163 arrived in the objective area, but enemy antiaircraft fire prevented the aircraft from landing. Fisher then requested Marine artillery and air to soften up the landing zones. Provisional Battery Y, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines with six towed 155mm howitzers, which had moved by truck the morning of the previous day from Phu Bai to forward firing positions just outside of Phong Dien, responded to the request. Because of the low ceiling, Marine fixed-wing aircraft were not available until 1145. After the artillery and air bombardment, HMM-163, finally, at 1255, started to bring Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's command group and both companies into Landing Zone Robin.<sup>63</sup>

Based on South Vietnamese intelligence that a large force of VC had moved east from the Lam Son-245 sector into the Marine area of operations and from the location of the enemy antiaircraft fire, Colonel Fisher ordered Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan to clear out the hamlet of Ap Dai Phu, about 1,000 meters to the west of LZ Robin before advancing to the south. After consolidating his positions around the landing zone, Sullivan was about to carry out his new orders when his Company A opened fire on two VC. The enemy soldiers evaded the Marines and escaped into some heavy brush to the east of the landing zone. According to the battalion commander, this action initiated "one of the Battalion's fiercest and hardest fought battles. . . ."<sup>64</sup>

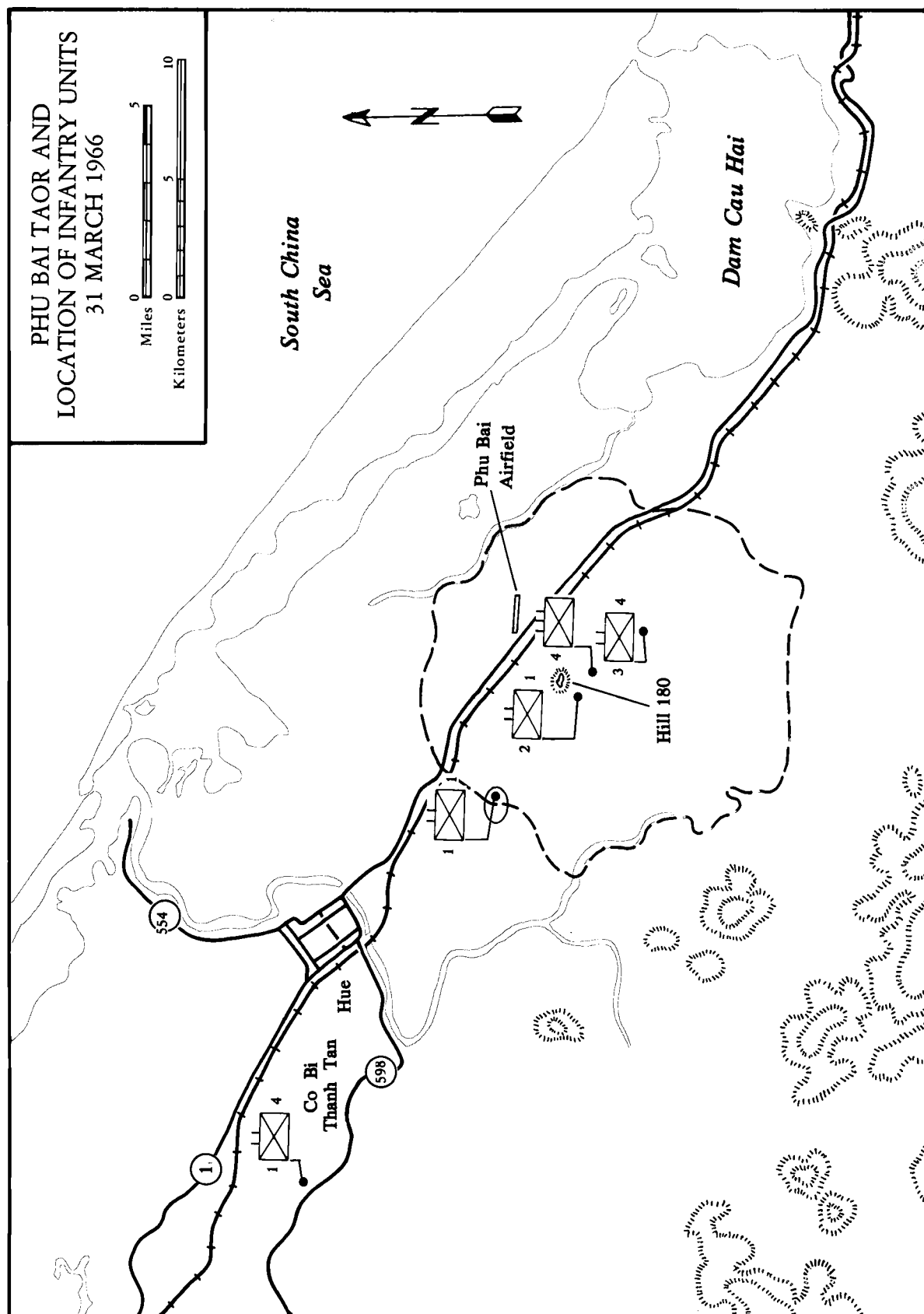
Unknown to the Marines, the *802d Battalion*, with two infantry companies, supported by a heavy weapons company, had fortified the tree-shrouded hamlet of Ap Chinh An, 800 meters east of LZ Robin. Camouflaging their bunkers as simple straw houses, the enemy carefully laid out fields of fire for their automatic weapons. They surrounded the village with barbed wire and a minefield. While extending its perimeter outward from the landing zone, Company B entered the minefield and detonated a mine which wounded one Marine. Still unaware of the extent of the enemy defenses and the size of the enemy force, Sullivan attempted to maneuver both his companies to take the hamlet. The enemy countered with 61mm and 82mm mortars and heavy machine gun fire. Forced to fall back, the battalion commander requested supporting arms. Marine artillery, air, and naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Richard B. Anderson* (DD 786) bombarded the Communist positions, but the

enemy, well dug-in, continued to hold out. At the request of Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, Colonel Fisher reinforced the battalion with Company E from the 1st Marines, which arrived in LZ Robin at 1649. After repeated unsuccessful assaults and after sustaining casualties of nine killed and 41 wounded, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan decided to halt the attack that evening and wait for reinforcements the following morning.<sup>65</sup>

Colonel Fisher on the night of 20 March developed his plans for the next day. He directed an artillery command group and a battery of 105mm howitzers to join the 155mm howitzers at Phong Dien. After a massive artillery and air bombardment, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan would renew his assault on Ap Chinh An. Fisher planned to helilift Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines into a landing zone, called LZ Duck, some 3,000 meters west of Robin. Hanifin's battalion would first clear the village of Ap Dai Phu and then reinforce Sullivan's attack on Ap Chinh An.<sup>66</sup>

A dense morning fog prevented air strikes in the objective area on 21 March, but Marine artillery laid down a heavy barrage on suspected enemy positions. After the artillery fire lifted, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion finally took Ap Chinh An against minor enemy resistance. Taking advantage of the darkness and fog, the bulk of the enemy force had moved out of the hamlet, leaving only a small rear-guard to harass the Marines. The fog also delayed the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's battalion into LZ Duck until 1115. Hanifin's battalion met no opposition and was able to clear its objectives without incident. Colonel Fisher arrived in LZ Duck later in the day and established his CP with the two Marine battalions.<sup>67</sup>

For the next two days, Task Group Foxtrot and its two Marine battalions, reinforced on the 22d by two South Vietnamese battalions, remained in the Oregon objective area. The 2d Battalion operated in the northwest sector while Sullivan's battalion advanced to the southeast, as originally planned, toward blocking positions established by the South Vietnamese battalions. Encountering only an occasional straggler, neither battalion met with any serious resistance. The operation officially came to end at 1130 on 23 March. Colonel Fisher and Hanifin's battalion returned to Phu Bai while Sullivan's unit remained in the Operation Oregon sector for a few more days.



For the four-day operation, the Marines sustained casualties of 11 dead and 45 wounded while killing at least 48 of the enemy and taking eight prisoners. Estimates of enemy dead were as high as 100. All of the Marine casualties occurred in the heavy fighting for Ap Chinh An. Supporting arms accounted for most of the enemy dead. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis, the commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, 12th Marines, recalled several years later that his provisional 155mm battery during the operation fired on a VC machine gun bunker "and scored a direct hit on the first volley of fire."<sup>68</sup> In his analysis of the operation, Colonel Fisher observed that the weather was a large factor, denying the Marines the advantage of surprise. Fisher also remarked that the lightness of Sullivan's assault battalion limited the Marines' maneuverability once contact was made.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the Marines had encountered a seasoned and well-trained foe. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan grudgingly complimented his enemy, declaring, "The tactics they utilized were not uncommon to good soldiering."<sup>70</sup>

With the completion of Operation Oregon, the new changes in command at the Phu Bai enclave were about to take place. As planned, on 28 March, Colonel Sherman, whose 4th Marines Headquarters had arrived from Chu Lai, opened his command post at Phu Bai. Colonel Fisher dissolved Task Group Foxtrot and returned to Da Nang and the 3d Marines. At about the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Leslie L. Page's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines Headquarters assumed control of the Phu Bai artillery from Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis' 4th Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Rudzis and his headquarters personnel departed on 29 March for Da Nang where he established his new CP. The Marines had reinforced Phu Bai with two reconnaissance companies, B and D, from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, which on the 28th formed Provisional Reconnaissance Group B, under the Company B commander, Captain James L. Compton. By the end of the month, the Marine forces at Phu Bai

numbered nearly 6,400 men including four infantry battalions, a helicopter squadron, the artillery battalion, the reconnaissance group, and other supporting units.<sup>71</sup>

Responsible for the defense of the northern base, Colonel Sherman assigned three of the battalions within the TAOR, and one outside, protecting the northwestern approaches. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was in the western sector; the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines had the defense of the Phu Bai vital area; and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines operated in the southern portion of the TAOR. On 27 March, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's battalion had moved from the Oregon area to the Co Bi-Thanh Tan region west of Hue. From there, the battalion, together with two artillery batteries located 2,500 meters to the south of its position, was able to support and provide a quick reaction force for the Marine reconnaissance teams operating northwest of Phu Bai.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the Marine buildup at Phu Bai, III MAF and MACV still differed about the extent of the enemy threat in the northern two provinces. General Walt believed that the successful operations earlier in the month together with the buildup of his northern forces had combined to contain the enemy.<sup>73</sup> Although A Shau had fallen, there was no apparent attempt by the *95th NVA Regiment* to move toward the coast. On the other hand, General Westmoreland's intelligence staff spoke of a major enemy offensive in the north, referring to the formation of a new enemy division and other units and a "known plan to attack Phu Bai."<sup>74</sup> In a meeting with General Walt on 24 March at Chu Lai, Westmoreland expressed his concern that the fall of A Shau exposed the I Corps western flank to the enemy. He also pointed to reports of NVA troops in the DMZ and near the Khe Sanh Special Forces Camp in northwestern Quang Tri Province as evidence that the enemy was on the move.<sup>75</sup> The Marines continued their close watch over developments in the north.



PART II  
CRISIS AND WAR IN CENTRAL I CORPS,  
SPRING 1966



## CHAPTER 5

# A Troubled Spring

*The Beginnings of the Political Crisis—Restructuring the Command—The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive—“Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles”*

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### *The Beginnings of the Political Crisis*

The increasing threat from the north during the spring of 1966 was a major concern, but an internal South Vietnamese political crisis in I Corps overshadowed the Communist buildup. Beneath the outward facade of national unity, several groups were dissatisfied with the military regime in Saigon. Deposed and disgruntled politicians maneuvered to restore civilian authority. Various Buddhist leaders criticized the National Leadership Committee or Directorate and demanded a national assembly. Within the government itself, military factions jockeyed for position. Compounding these rivalries were the traditional schisms between “northerners” and “southerners,” and between Catholics and Buddhists. These elements of disharmony threatened the delicate fabric of South Vietnamese political cohesiveness.

Until the end of February, Premier Ky managed to keep his political opponents off-balance by granting piecemeal concessions. He promised a constitution to be approved by a referendum, followed by creation of a representative government; this reform process would take over a year to implement. The referendum on the constitution was not to be held until October 1966, and elections to any resulting national assembly would not take place until sometime in 1967. In effect, Ky was offering his rivals the possibility of power sometime in the future, while he and his supporters remained at the helm for an indefinite period.

The South Vietnamese Premier viewed General Thi, the I Corps commander, as his most dangerous potential rival. Born of peasant stock and native to the region, Thi was popular with both his troops and the people of I Corps. He capitalized on this sentiment, as well as the population’s traditional distrust of Saigon, and carved out his own power base, centered in Hue where he maintained his residence.

During 1966, Thi continued to consolidate his position in I Corps by appointing officials personally loyal to him, including a new mayor of Da Nang, a civilian physician with little administrative experience, Dr. Nguyen Van Man.

After his return from the Honolulu Conference, General Ky viewed the existing political situation in I Corps with increasing alarm. On 3 March, the premier flew to Hue in order personally to investigate allegations that Thi was directing agitation against the government. In a lively confrontation, Ky and the I Corps commander exchanged charges and countercharges; Premier Ky promptly returned to Saigon and called for a special meeting of the National Leadership Council to settle the dispute.

At the extraordinary session of the Council which assembled on 10 March, Ky asked his military colleagues for a formal vote of confidence. He further

*LtGen Nguyen Chanh Thi, the South Vietnamese I Corps commander, presents a captured enemy weapon to Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, during the latter's visit in January 1966. The removal of Gen Thi in March was to trigger the spring political crisis.*

Marine Corps Photo A186694

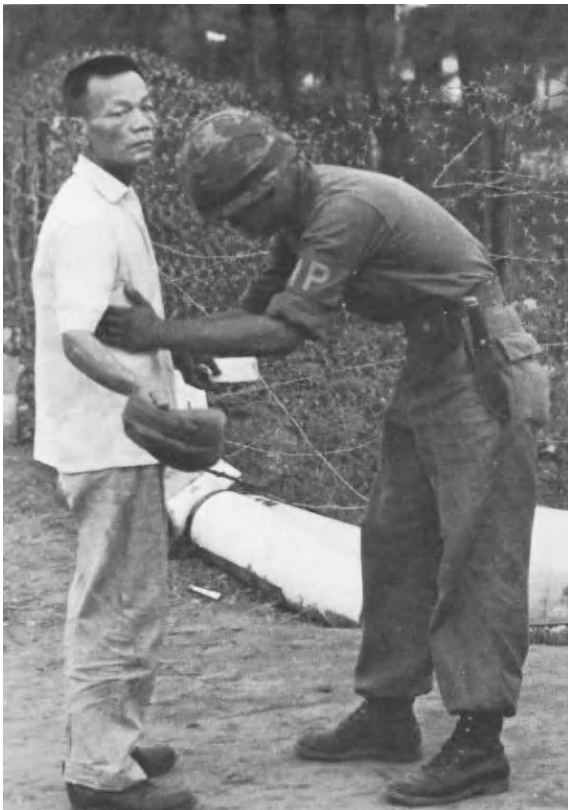


stated that he would resign if Thi was not stripped of his command. In a secret ballot the majority of the Council backed the premier and called for Thi's dismissal on grounds of insubordination. The deposed I Corps commander, present during the proceedings, accepted the decision gracefully. On 11 March, a government spokesman announced that General Thi had requested sick leave because of "sinus trouble." Brigadier General Nguyen Van Chuan, the 1st ARVN Division commanding general, became the new I Corps commander and Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan replaced Chuan as division commander.<sup>1</sup>

The removal of General Thi caused an immediate shock wave throughout I Corps. On the announcement of his removal, approximately 2,000 persons, including soldiers, marched through the streets of Da Nang in protest. Soon afterward, elements loyal to the ousted general and other factions opposed to the government, including several Buddhist groups, joined forces. A number of anti-Ky coalitions were formed in the northern cities. The one in Da Nang assumed the title of the "Military and Civilian Strug-

*A Marine MP searches a South Vietnamese worker employed at the Da Nang Airbase as he departs the base. Political tensions, which included strikes by Vietnamese employees of the Americans, increased security precautions.*

Marine Corps Photo A187177



gle Committee for I Corps," while a group in Hue called themselves the "Popular Forces to Struggle for the Revolution."

The "Struggle Force," as the dissident forces came to be known, immediately applied economic and political pressure on the Saigon regime. On 13 March the Struggle Committee in Da Nang called a general strike which practically paralyzed the city. No policemen reported for duty; shops, port facilities, and schools closed; and approximately 90 percent of the civilian workers at the Da Nang Airbase failed to show up for work. Large numbers of protesters held mass meetings and conducted more demonstrations.

On 15 March, Premier Ky made an unsuccessful attempt to placate the insurgents. He allowed General Thi to return to I Corps for a brief visit. Supposedly the former I Corps commander was to announce publicly that he accepted his dismissal as being in the best interest of the country. Upon his arrival, Thi was received by large enthusiastic crowds both in Da Nang and Hue. In his somewhat ambiguous addresses to the throngs, Thi expressed several reservations about the central government. Furthermore, instead of a brief visit, Thi moved into his official residence in Hue for an "extended rest." He remained in I Corps for almost two months, thus adding to the political ferment by his presence.

### *Restructuring the Command*

Despite the internal Vietnamese political crisis, the United States continued its planned buildup in Vietnam and revamped the command structure to accommodate the needs of the growing American force. During March, the Secretary of the Navy approved the establishment of U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam while the Air Force moved to transform the 2d Air Division into the Seventh Air Force. These two new MACV component commands were established on 1 April 1966. In the interim, General Westmoreland made some changes in his Army combat forces. On 15 March 1966, he redesignated Lieutenant General Stanley R. Larsen's command in II Corps from Field Force, Vietnam to I Field Force, Vietnam. In III Corps, he established II Field Force, Vietnam under Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman. Generals Larsen and Seaman were responsi-



ble directly to General Westmoreland in his capacity as ComUSMACV for all U.S. ground operations in their respective corps operating areas.

In I Corps, similar changes were occurring in the Marine command. Throughout the first three months of 1966, units of the 1st Marine Division continued to arrive in Vietnam. Major General Fields planned to move his headquarters from Okinawa to Chu Lai at the end of March. The 1st Division was to assume responsibility for the Chu Lai TAOR while the 3d Marine Division was to retain control of the Phu Bai and Da Nang enclaves.

In March, General Walt began to restructure his command to conform to the planned transformation of III MAF into a two-division ground force supported by a large aircraft wing. On the 15th, he established the Force Logistic Command (FLC), which assumed control of the force logistic support groups at Da Nang and Chu Lai and the logistic support unit at Phu Bai. The III MAF commander named his former Chief of Staff, Colonel George C. Axtell, Jr., as the FLC commander. General Walt then abolished the 3d Marine Division command group at Chu Lai. Colonel Peatross, as the senior officer there, temporarily assumed command of the enclave awaiting the arrival of General Fields and the 1st Division Headquarters. The former assistant division commander at Chu Lai, General Platt, then replaced Colonel Axtell as the III MAF Chief of Staff.

On 18 March, General Walt relinquished direct command of the 3d Marine Division so that he could devote more time and energy to his duties as Commanding General, III MAF. Recently promoted Major General Wood B. Kyle, winner of two Silver Stars during World War II, became the new commanding general of the division. Brigadier General Lowell E. English continued as the assistant commander of the 3d Marine Division.\* He assumed responsibility for Task Force Delta operations outside the Marine enclaves and later moved his headquarters to Phu Bai.

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\*Brigadier General English arrived at Da Nang in late December 1965 on very short notice from the U.S. Strike Command as the replacement for Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson. He later wrote that he moved out of the Strike Command "with 48 hours notice to HQMC (16 Dec) and Da Nang (20 Dec)." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Walt also prepared to give up his functions and responsibilities as MACV's Naval Component Commander to Rear Admiral Norvell G. Ward, who was to head the U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, a command that was to be established effective 1 April 1966. The Naval Support Activity, Da Nang would then come under Ward's operational control although remaining under the command of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet and continuing to provide common item supply and other supporting services to III MAF.<sup>2</sup>

These structural changes in the command and staff had little effect on III MAF's basic mission. It remained all-inclusive. The Marines would continue to conduct military operations in I Corps "in support of and in coordination with CG, I ARVN Corps and in other areas of RVN as directed by ComUSMACV, in order to assist the GVN to defeat the VC/NVA and extend GVN control over all of South Vietnam."<sup>3</sup>

### *The Beginnings of the Da Nang Offensive*

During early and mid-March, the 3d Marine Division units in the Da Nang enclave made some progress in extending government control within the TAOR. Although Colonel Fisher and many of his 3d Marines staff were attached to Task Group Foxtrot at Phu Bai during much of this period, both his 1st and 2d Battalions maintained a high level of small-unit activity at Da Nang.

In the 3d Marines northern sector, Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines conducted extensive patrols throughout its area of operations. One company operated north of the Cu De River while two companies sent out long-range patrols to the western edge of the battalion's TAOR. The remaining company maintained security for the battalion CP.

On 14 March, Lieutenant Colonel Dickey issued his operation order for Golden Fleece II, an operation to protect the spring rice harvest in his TAOR. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines had originated the designation for this type operation during the previous fall harvest season.\*\* Under the Golden

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\*\*See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, Chapter 9.

Fleece concept, a Marine battalion protected the Vietnamese villagers harvesting their crop "by conducting day and night patrols in areas suspected to be used by VC for access to rice harvest areas; assisting local PF units to guard rice harvesters and rice storage areas as requested by village chiefs."<sup>4</sup> Dickey's Marines provided protection for the harvesters and the crop through the remainder of the month. Contact with the VC was minimal.

In the regiment's southern area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel William K. Horn's 2d Battalion, 3d Marines conducted more than 550 squad patrols and established over 530 night ambushes during the month of March alone. More than half of the patrols were conducted at night. Like Dickey's battalion, Horn's Marines made only limited contact with the VC. The 2d Battalion suffered casualties of six killed and 31 wounded, while killing one VC and capturing one prisoner. Despite the low-grade combat in his area of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Horn observed in his monthly chronology, "... numerous reports indicate VC units are moving eastward," into the 9th Marines sector.<sup>5</sup>

Colonel Simmons' 9th Marines was responsible for the southern approaches to Da Nang. At the beginning of March, he prepared plans for offensive operations against local VC forces that were literally entrenched within his TAOR. The regimental commander compared the VC "infrastructure" in his sector to a cancerous growth with its tentacles embedded in the hamlets. Simmons believed that the only way the Marines could root out the "cancer" was to "scrub" the hamlets clean. He observed that mere patrolling and ground sweeps would not do the job. It was:

... not a matter of going from here to there. We can march from Dien Ban to Dai Loc any time of the day we want to. This didn't mean anything. You had to take apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again.<sup>6</sup>

Simmons' concept of operations for his March offensive south of Da Nang required the regiment to continue its "vigorous clearing action down to the La Tho and Thanh Quit River line," employing County Fair search and cordon tactics. Later in the month, the 9th Marines would extend its "scrubbing" operations southward. The regiment first would concentrate its efforts around Route 4 where the ARVN maintained a number of outposts, and then gradually advance south of the confluence of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. In these phases of the offensive,

the Marines would take a 1,000-meter square or a complex of hamlets as an objective, using one or two companies to "work this area until we find what was there."<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of March, the battalions of the 9th Marines started their clearing operations south of Da Nang. On the regimental western flank, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines on 5 March established its forward headquarters on Hill 55, which was later to become the regimental command post for the southward advance. The Viet Cong, nevertheless, continued to resist the battalion's clearing efforts on this important site as exemplified in the following excerpts from Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's diary:

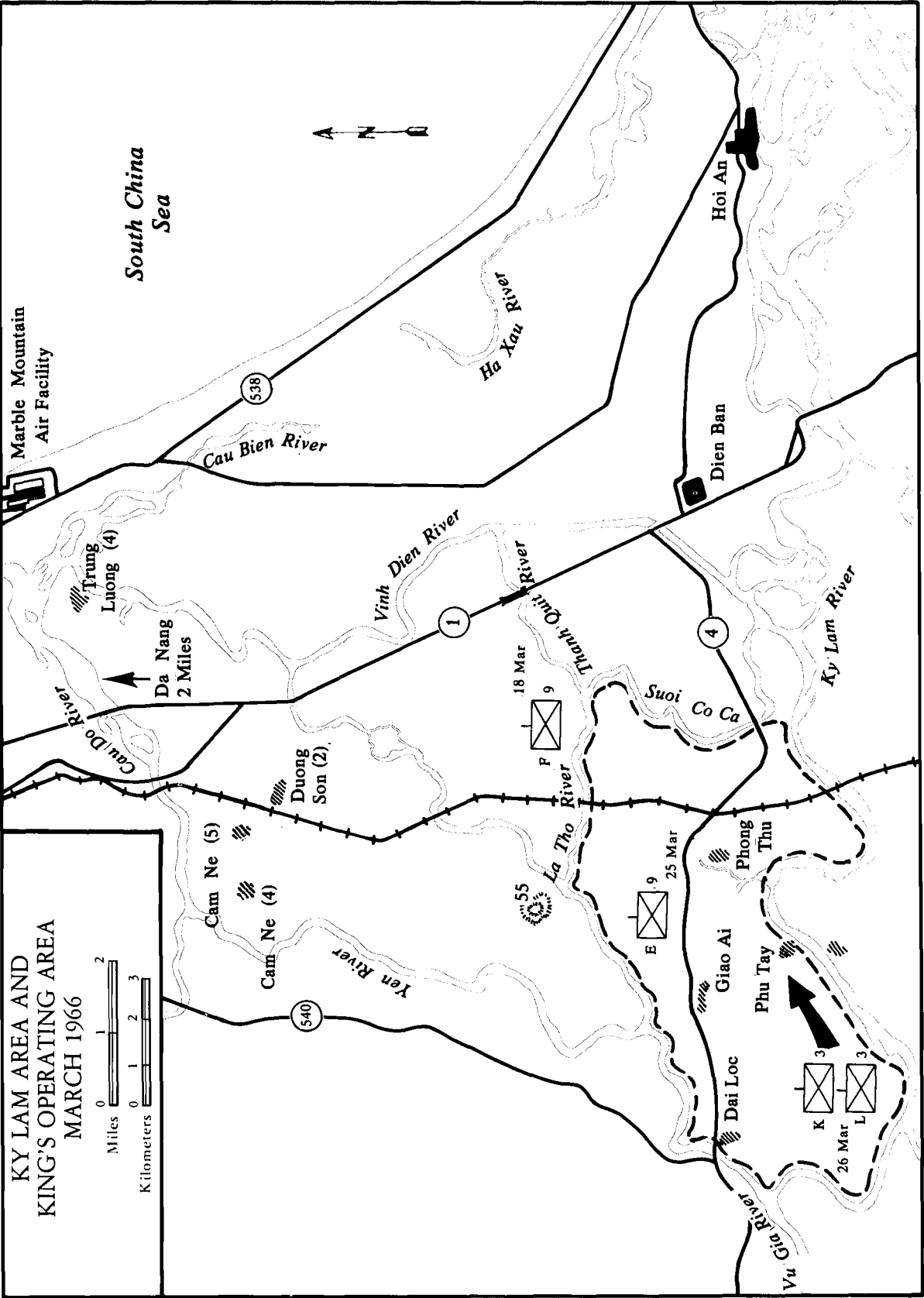
On 10 March two VC killed as they attempted to infiltrate the defensive wire on Hill 55.

On 12 March Hill 55 came under mortar attack.

On 17 March three engineers were KIA at the water point just to the east of Hill 55 (... back-to-back chewings by Gen Walt and Col Simmons re security at W.P. ...)\*

In the 9th Marines' eastern zone of operations, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, acting on intelligence that a guerrilla platoon was in the vicinity of the Can Bien River, conducted a three-company operation at the Hoa Long village complex south of Marble Mountain. Although the Marines encountered no VC, they found evidence of recent guerrilla activity. The village chief, who accompanied the Marines, pointed out the house of a local VC and assisted in the screening of the villagers. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor observed that the presence of the village chief not only assisted in the questioning of the suspects, but also exposed the population "to a local GVN official." The battalion commander also asked that RFs or PFs be attached to his unit for such operations as these Vietnamese would "... remove the image of 'American occupation,' that is generated by the extended use of U.S. forces only on such operations."<sup>8\*</sup>

\*Colonel Carrington recalled an incident involving Lieutenant Colonel Taylor that graphically illustrated the frustrations the U.S. forces faced in telling friend from foe in the hamlets south of Da Nang. Taylor had personally been involved in a "chase to catch some enemy suspects, but had to admit that he could not prove them such after they had abandoned their weapons and were without identifying uniforms." Carrington quotes Taylor explaining to General Walt, "Yeah. There they were, General, sweating like whores in Church." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the 9th Marines central sector, conducted the month's first County Fair operation on 7-8 March in the hamlet of Duong Son (2), 2,500 meters below the Cau Do and east of the railroad. In this combined operation, the Marines killed five VC. According to a captured enemy document, "The U.S. and GVN forces displaced the villagers to a general area where our cadre were isolated from them. Some of our cadre and guerrilla fighters were forced to emerge from their hiding places. . . ." <sup>10</sup>

After the operation in Duong Son (2), the 9th Marines' battalions conducted three more County Fairs during the next 10 days. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines carried out one in the hamlet of Trung Luong (4), on a small peninsula 2,500 meters southwest of Marble Mountain. In this two-day operation, 14-15 March, Marines and ARVN officials registered 1,397 persons and provided them with identity cards. They held three suspects for further questioning.

Further west, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, in conjunction with the ARVN 51st Regiment, held two County Fairs in the Cam Ne village complex, the scene the previous year of the notorious Zippo lighter incident.\* During County Fairs on 17 March, Dorsey's Marines and the ARVN troops netted some measurable results in the hamlets of Cam Ne (4) and (5). They killed two Viet Cong, held 13 persons for further questioning, captured a VC nurse, confiscated over a ton of hidden rice, found several VC documents, and, as an extra bonus, discovered two ARVN deserters. <sup>11</sup>

While the 9th Marines was conducting the County Fair cordon and search operations in the hamlets north of the La Tho and Thanh Quit line, the Marine command was perfecting plans for the advance to the Ky Lam-Thu Bon Rivers. General Kyle, who assumed command of the 3d Division on 18 March, was in complete agreement with Colonel

Simmons' desire to "scrub" the area south of Da Nang. He ordered his division staff to prepare an operational order for a regimental operation to relieve enemy pressure on the ARVN outposts along Route 4. The mission of the 9th Marines was to conduct "search and destroy operations in south central Quang Nam Province . . . and to provide Golden Fleece and/or Rural Construction operations as required or requested." Although officially designated as a search and destroy mission to satisfy MACV demands for battalion days in the field, the operation, codenamed Kings, was obviously intended to be a long-term occupation of the area. The Kings area of operations extended from the La Tho-Thanh Quit Line southward to the Ky Lam, with the main target the area south of Route 4. <sup>12</sup>

On 18 March, Company F, 9th Marines, under Captain Carl A. Reckewell, was conducting a routine search and clear mission on the northern bank of the La Tho just east of the railroad. At 1630 the Marines came under 81mm and 60mm mortar fire. After the mortar bombardment, a VC company launched three ground assaults. Captain Reckewell's men repulsed each of the enemy attacks and later found 10 enemy bodies nearby.

Although it had been scheduled for later in the month, Colonel Simmons decided to begin Operation Kings at once. He designated Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion as the controlling unit. Donahue, whose command post was located in Duong Son (2), asked for permission to move his headquarters to Hill 55 to ensure "a central location and good observation of the area" for the operation. When approval was given, the 2d Battalion established its forward headquarters on the hill, temporarily displacing the command post of the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. <sup>13</sup>

From 19 March through the 23d, the battalion systematically worked over the eastern sector of the Kings area of operations, extending from the La Tho River south to the Ky Lam and from the railroad east to the Suoi Co Ca River. Although reinforced by two companies of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, Donahue employed no more than three companies in Kings at any one time. On 23 March, as the companies moved into the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines sector west of the railroad track, Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey assumed command of the operation and also operational control of Company E, 9th Marines and his own Company M. <sup>14</sup>

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\*See Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam*, 1965, Chapter 4. The Cam Ne area continued to be a trouble spot for the Marines. Colonel Dennis commented that the Cam Ne villages were located along the Marine main supply route which "required mine-booby trap clearing at least daily—sometimes twice or three times daily. In fact, one bridge along this route was destroyed four times, including burning and dismantling." Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [June 78] (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187763

*Marines of Company H, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines search a house in a Vietnamese hamlet south of Da Nang during Operation Kings. The Marines' objective was to eliminate the VC power base in the area south of Da Nang by taking "apart each one of these hamlets bit by bit and see what was in there and put it together again."*

The heaviest action occurred in the early morning of 25 March. Captain Robert J. Driver, Jr.'s Company E had established defensive positions for the night, 3,500 meters west of the railroad and 1,000 meters north of Route 4. At 0030, the Marines at a listening post heard a small force of VC, using water buffalo as a screen, attempting to infiltrate the company's perimeter. In the resulting exchange of small arms fire, the Marines killed two VC. Another listening post reported enemy movement to its front at about the same time and a Marine threw a grenade at the suspected VC. One-half hour later, a 75-round mortar barrage hit the company position. The Viet Cong followed the mortar attack with a two-company assault. Simultaneously, other enemy units placed a heavy volume of small arms fire on night positions of Company M, 9th Marines to the southwest, preventing these Marines from coming to Driver's assistance. Company E bore the brunt of repeated VC ground attacks for the next hour. With the help of 1,000 105mm rounds of supporting fire from the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, Driver's men repulsed the VC with heavy losses. Although the enemy attack ended shortly after 0200, Marine ar-

tillery continued to fire interdiction missions, and a Marine flare plane illuminated the battlefield until 0500. As a result of the fighting, Company E suffered five killed and 19 wounded, but the Marines killed at least 40 of the enemy.<sup>15</sup>

The Marines identified the attacking enemy unit as the *R-20* or *Doc Lap Battalion*, which had been harassing the ARVN outposts on Route 4 since mid-February. In its March chronology, the 9th Marines made the following observations about the attack on 25 March:

The preliminary contacts, sequence of attacks, scheme of maneuver, large-scale employment of mortars, use of a diverting force, speed and ferocity of attack once battle was joined and the very evident seeking out of the specific key targets and objectives during the attack, all indicate that this was a well-planned, deliberately executed, and hard fought action conducted by seasoned well-trained Main Force Viet Cong troops.<sup>16</sup>

The operation continued for three more days. On the morning of 26 March, Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from newly arrived HMM-164 brought two companies from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines in-

to landing zones south of Route 4.\* After artillery and fixed-wing preparation, Captain William F. Lee's Company L landed at 0730 just north of the Ky Lam River and approximately 3,700 meters southwest of where Company E had been attacked by the *Doc Lap Battalion*. Company K under Captain Lyndell M. Orsburn landed two hours later, 1,500 meters north of Company L's landing zone. The two companies then advanced along a northeasterly axis toward Route 4. At about 1400, Captain Lee's company met heavy resistance from VC, who fought from well-prepared positions near Phu Tay (3). Lee asked for close air support; Marine jets from MAG-11 and MAG-12 responded, dropping general purpose bombs and napalm on the VC entrenchments and then strafing them with 20mm fire. Enemy opposition ended.<sup>17</sup>

On 27 March, the two 3d Battalion companies renewed their advance toward Route 4, experiencing the same pattern of fighting as that of the previous day. Both companies met stiff resistance from well-entrenched VC and called in air support to destroy the enemy. After the air missions, the Marine companies proceeded with their "scouring" action south of the highway. In the meantime, Companies E and M of the 9th Marines were withdrawn from Operation Kings at midday, after completing a similar operation north of Route 4. The following day, the 28th, the entire operation came to an end when the two 3d Battalion, 3d Marines companies reached Route 4, their final objective. Eight Marine companies had participated in Kings, although no more than four during any given period.<sup>18</sup>

The results of Operation Kings were more significant than the resulting kill ratio. The 9th Marines killed at least 58 enemy, while the regiment suffered eight Marine dead and 60 wounded. The most important result was the Marine penetration for an extended period of an area that had long been dominated by the Viet Cong. Colonel Simmons later observed that, "we moved back and forth during Kings with rather good results."<sup>19</sup> According to the

9th Marines monthly report, the regiment cleared out:

... a substantial portion of the ... enemy fortification's defenses, extended the boundaries of the battalion's zones of operation, and went far toward preparing the region for the reassertion of GVN influence and control.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of March, the 9th Marines had made a significant enlargement of its zone of operations south of the Cau Do and its operations now extended below Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey had moved his battalion command post back to Hill 55 and, on 29 March, Marine engineers had begun constructing the regimental command post there.

The Marines believed they had made vital progress in pacification, both as a result of Operation Kings and the County Fairs conducted during the month. Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, in the 9th Marines eastern sector, began its rice harvest protection mission, similar to the one conducted by the 3d Marines and also called Golden Fleece II. On 4 April, General Kyle issued an operation order which extended Golden Fleece II to all rice harvesting areas in 3d Marine Division sectors.

At this point the bubble of optimism about pacification progress suddenly burst. During the period 5-12 April, the dispute over the removal of General Thi almost caused open combat between armed factions of South Vietnamese forces. South of Da Nang, elements of the 51st ARVN Regiment, including the attached 39th Ranger Battalion, abandoned their Giao Ai and Phong Thu outposts along Route 4. At Phong Thu, the rangers left behind, unguarded, 13 tons of ordnance, including small arms ammunition, mortar rounds, and 700 antipersonnel mines. The Viet Cong helped themselves to this material. Necessarily, the 9th Marines halted all offensive operations and assumed a defensive stance.<sup>21</sup> The effect upon pacification was readily apparent in the I Corps National Priority Area.

An American civilian official assigned to the sector during this period, Paul Hare, commented that the Marine County Fair operations were one of the most successful security measures and "... probably the only way to break the back of the local VC infrastructure, but to be effective it must be a continuing operation. Needless to say, none have taken place in the last ten days or so." Hare pointed out that other factors, such as the confusing command structure, were also responsible for some of the difficulties in the National Priority Area. He wryly remarked:

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\*HMM-164, under Lieutenant Colonel Warren C. Watson, arrived in Vietnam on 7 March. It was the first CH-46 squadron assigned to Vietnam. The twin-engine, tandem-rotor Sea Knight aircraft carried almost twice the load of the UH-34s. For further discussion of the 46s, see Chapter 14.

Basic to the problem is the relationship of Major Nhat (. . . Pacification Leader) and Captain Hoa (District Chief of Hoa Vang). Cadre generally speak to Major Nhat; village and hamlet chiefs to both; ARVN to Colonel Lap; RF to nobody; and the PF and (Revolutionary Cadre) to anyone who happens to talk to them. The situation is confusing to the extreme.

This, compounded with the fact that ARVN security forces now "focused on the political intrigues of Da Nang," brought pacification to a standstill.<sup>22</sup>

*"Keep Out . . . Da Nang Has Troubles"*

Following General Thi's return to I Corps, the political situation deteriorated. The deposed corps commander's presence in Hue provided the "Struggle Forces" with a living symbol of their confrontation with the Saigon regime. On 23 March, they held crippling strikes in Da Nang and Hue, which seriously impeded the flow of supplies to III MAF. The Buddhist leaders demanded that the military junta resign in favor of a civilian assembly and for the first time attacked Premier Ky by name. Students seized the Hue radio station and used it to support their antigovernment agitation. Statements of dissidents began to take on anti-American overtones. While expressing gratitude for U.S. assistance, they accused the Americans of interfering in internal South Vietnamese politics by supporting the Ky administration.

General Walt attempted to keep his forces out of any involvement in the dispute, but minor incidents between the Marines and the "Struggle Forces" occurred. In one such incident on 26 March, a Marine lance corporal from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, assigned to the Marine security guard at the Hue City LCU ramp, tore down an anti-American banner put up by some students on a nearby wall. The student leader went to the American consulate and warned that if he "did not receive an apology within two hours," the students would destroy the United States Information Service Building. At that point, Colonel Fisher, who was still at Phu Bai as Commander, Task Group Foxtrot, arrived at the consulate to discuss the matter with the student leader, Buu Ton, and consular and other U.S. and South Vietnamese officials there. Colonel Fisher told Buu Ton that he would investigate the affair, and that if Marines were responsible, he would apologize.

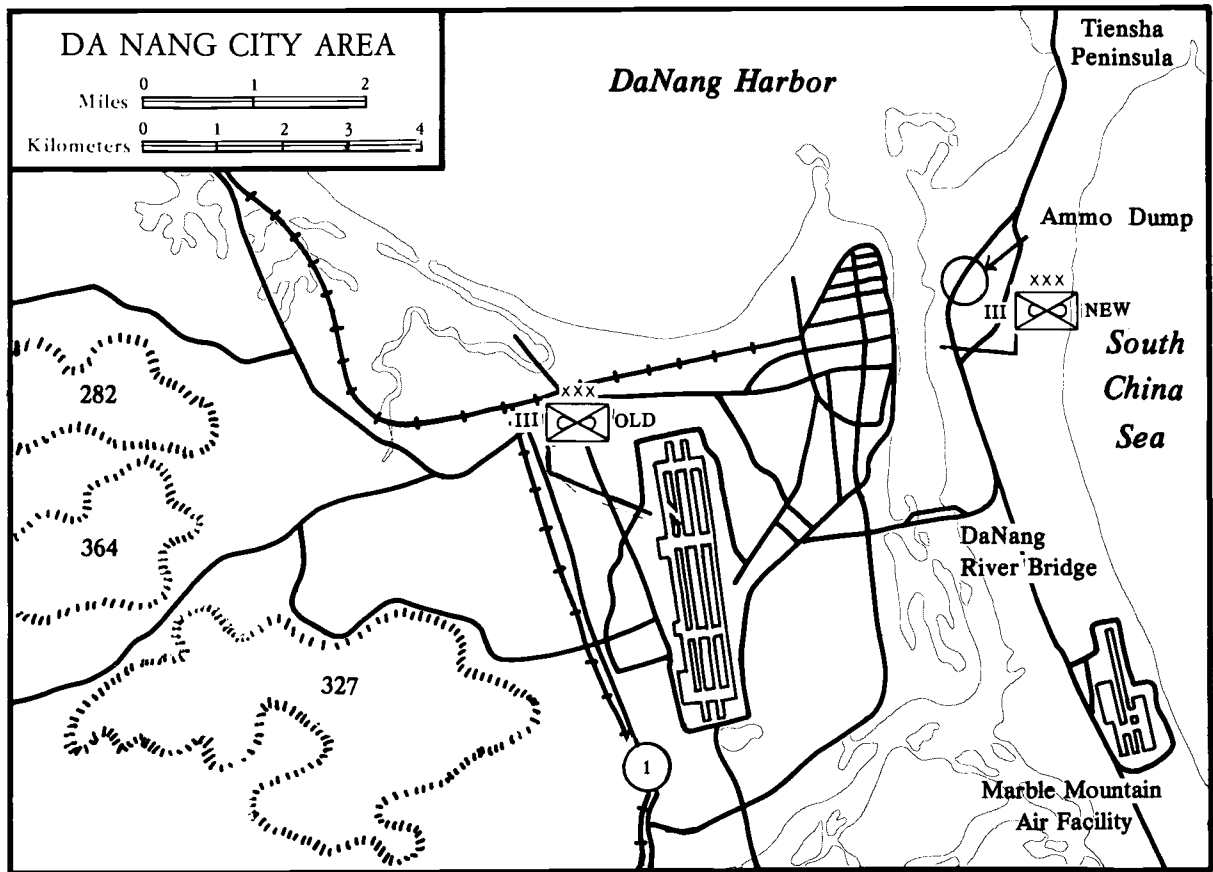
Fisher insisted that the tearing down of the banner in no way reflected U.S. policy. Buu Ton was unwilling to accept Colonel Fisher's explanation and demanded to go to the LCU ramp and identify the Marine.<sup>23</sup>

The group at the consulate, including Buu Ton and Colonel Fisher, departed for the LCU ramp area where they confronted the hapless Marine responsible for the incident. The young lance corporal apologized for his action to the student leader, but the latter refused to acknowledge it. Buu Ton had further demands. He wanted the Marine to make his apology publicly over the Hue radio and then replace the banner "in public view." Moreover the American officials were to issue orders to all U.S. personnel not to interfere or participate in South Vietnamese politics. Buu Ton then left the U.S. and South Vietnamese officials and returned to his headquarters.<sup>24</sup>

After arriving back at the consulate, the American officials received instructions from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon on how to deal with the situation. There was to be "no public apology;" the Marine "would not replace the banner . . . [and] The man would be punished within the framework of U.S. military justice;" but Buu Ton "would be assured that there would be no further occurrences of this nature."<sup>25</sup>

In another meeting with the student leader and South Vietnamese officials later that day, Colonel Fisher informed Buu Ton that the "Act was by an individual contrary to orders and U.S. policy and that appropriate disciplinary action would be taken by III MAF authorities." Buu Ton was still not satisfied. He stated that he had to have something "in writing to show his followers." At that stage, Colonel Geoffrey H. Boston, the U.S. Army senior advisor to the 1st ARVN Division and the subarea coordinator, entered the discussion. He promised Buu Ton "a written assurance that he would do what he could to prevent such acts in the future." Buu Ton received his letter the following day, thus ending this particular episode.<sup>26</sup>

On 30 March, there occurred another incident which further inflamed relations between the U.S. military and the dissident groups in I Corps. A Marine driver in Da Nang scraped the fender of a civilian vehicle on one of the city's narrow streets. The dissidents claimed two Vietnamese died in the accident and demanded that "top U.S. officials come to Da Nang within 48 hours or we will not be



responsible for the lives and property of U.S. residents." Both the Embassy and MACV ignored the ultimatum, but it was indicative of the increasing militancy of the Struggle Forces.<sup>27</sup>

Since the dissidents held many of the centers of political power in I Corps, Premier Ky decided to reassert his authority. At a press conference on 3 April, he stated: "I consider Da Nang to be in the hands of the Communists and the government will organize an operation to retake . . . [the city]." The next night, Ky, accompanied by two members of the Directorate and three Vietnamese Marine battalions, flew to Da Nang on board U.S. Air Force transport aircraft. The Marines were held at the airfield and did not attempt to enter the city. General Chuan, the I Corps commander, visited Ky at the airbase on the morning of 5 April and apparently convinced the premier to change his mind about moving against the insurgents. Ky made a radio broadcast that afternoon in which he stated that the city was not under Communist control as he had first believed. Ky left

for Saigon that night, but the Vietnamese Marine battalions stayed behind.<sup>28</sup>

With the three Vietnamese Marine battalions poised at Da Nang Airbase and the rebels in control of the city, General Walt was in a very uncomfortable position. Although not wanting to appear to be meddling in South Vietnam's internal politics, the III MAF commander wanted to keep the antagonists apart. He feared that the crisis would not only interrupt the war against the Communists, but, more importantly, that U.S. forces would become embroiled if fighting broke out between the two factions.<sup>29</sup>

The situation came to a climax on 9 April. Colonel Dam Quang Yeu, commander of the Quang Nam Special Sector, who openly supported the Struggle Movement, led an armored convoy of anti-government ARVN forces equipped with four 155mm howitzers north along Route 1 from Hoi An toward Da Nang. About 1030, General Kyle directed Colonel Simmons to block the highway as



close to Dien Ban as possible. The 9th Marines commander decided that the Thanh Quit Bridge, nine miles south of the airbase, was the best place to stop the convoy. An hour later, Captain Reckewell, the commander of Company F, 9th Marines, stationed one of his platoons supported by two Ontos on the northern side of the bridge. The Marines purposely had stalled a 2½-ton truck on the bridge itself. In somewhat of an understatement, the 9th Marines reported, "This block effectively served its purpose by stopping northbound vehicular traffic."<sup>30\*</sup>

The dangers of a serious confrontation at the bridge remained. Armed American Marines faced the heavily armed South Vietnamese convoy. Colonel Yeu emplaced his 155mm howitzers and trained them on the airfield. When General Walt learned of the situation, he sent the III MAF G-3, Colonel John R. Chaisson, who had relieved Colonel Simmons when the latter assumed command of the 9th Marines, to talk over the situation with Colonel Yeu. Chaisson, a 1939 Harvard graduate, a veteran of two previous wars, and a highly articulate officer, arrived at the bridge site to meet with the South Vietnamese commander. He warned Yeu that if the latter's troops continued their advance or shelled the base, the Americans would consider it an attack upon themselves and would react accordingly. As Chaisson spoke, a flight of Marine F-8E Crusaders, armed with bombs and rockets, circled overhead. General Walt ordered Marine artillery to lay one 155mm battery and two 8-inch howitzers on the rebel positions, but to fire only on his personal command.

While the situation remained tense, Colonel Chaisson apparently convinced Colonel Yeu that aggressive action by the rebels would not be in anyone's best interests. Yeu contented himself with a show of force. Thirty minutes after Chaisson left to report back to General Walt, the ARVN commander



Marine Corps Photo A187321  
*Marines from the 9th Marines stand outside the Hotel Da Nang as they prepare to evacuate U.S. civilians from the city during the political crisis. Using loudspeakers, radios, and telephones they directed people to the evacuation sites.*

ordered his artillery unit to return to Hoi An, but Yeu and the ARVN infantry stayed where they were.<sup>31</sup>

Prior to the confrontation at the Thanh Quit Bridge, the Marines evacuated American civilians, U.S. military personnel, and foreign nationals from the city of Da Nang in accordance with orders from MACV. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines commander, later recalled that he was helilifted at 0200 on the morning of 9 April to the III MAF CP to attend a briefing on the planned evacuation by Colonel Chaisson "and a representative of the State Department."<sup>32</sup> At 0740, helicopters from MAG-16 landed two of his companies, E and H, in the northeastern sector of the city. The Marines, using radios, telephones, and loudspeakers, directed the people to the evacuation site. Marine helicopters and Navy landing craft brought 700 evacuees from Da Nang to Marine positions on the Tiensha Peninsula. By 1620, the evacuation operation was over.<sup>33</sup>

During the following week, there was a considerable lessening of tension in I Corps. On 10 April, General Ton That Dinh replaced General Chuan as the I Corps commander and the newly appointed officer quickly took steps to defuse the situation. He ordered all ARVN troops back to their units and moved one of the Vietnamese Marine battalions

\*According to one Marine officer, Captain Reckewell later told him that Colonel Yeu had threatened to use his howitzers, but Reckewell had replied: "I'll see those 155's and raise you two F-8's." General Simmons recently wrote that not finding the battalion commander, he personally led Reckewell's "company to the bridge that day." Col Paul C. Trammell, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 and BGen Edwin H. Simmons, notation on Trammell Comments, dtd 16Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donahue, had been called earlier to the III MAF CP for a briefing on the evacuation of U.S. nationals from Da Nang.



Marine Corps Photo A421624

*A Marine carries a baby for its mother as they hurry to board a waiting helicopter. During the evacuation, the Marines brought out 700 people from Da Nang City.*

to Quang Ngai. On 12 April, the remaining Vietnamese Marines returned to Saigon. At the conclusion of a government-sponsored national political congress on 14 April, Chief of State Thieu announced that general elections would be held in three to five months. This decree satisfied many of the dissidents. Even the outspoken Thich Tri Quang, who had led the 1963 Buddhist revolt and was still a key Buddhist leader in Central Vietnam, called for a moratorium on strikes and demonstrations. The head of the Buddhist Institute, the moderate Tam Chau, also agreed that the Ky government should stay on until the formation of a national assembly. In Da Nang and Hue, shops reopened, civilian laborers reported for work, and governmental functions returned to normal.

This uneasy calm was short-lived. On 15 April, General Thi demanded that the Saigon government step down immediately. Mayor Man supported the demand and the rebel-controlled Da Nang and Hue radio stations repeated the verbal attacks against the Ky regime. In a move reminiscent of the 1963 Revolution against Diem, the radical Buddhist leaders announced that 60 monks and nuns were prepared to immolate themselves if Ky did not resign.

At a press conference on 7 May, Ky provided further provocation. He announced that the constituent assembly, which the government had promised within five months, would not be transformed into a national assembly. Instead that body would simply draft a constitution and be dissolved until a national assembly was elected some time in 1967. Ky's statement drew an immediate reaction. Tri Quang led a chorus of protests, and demonstrations once more broke out in Da Nang and Hue. The premier remained adamant and replaced the Director General of the National Police, a Thi supporter, with Colonel Ngoc Loan, a man loyal to Ky.

Early on the morning of 15 May, Premier Ky moved swiftly to put down the revolt in Da Nang once and for all. Charging that the Struggle Forces had committed acts of terror the previous night, Ky airlifted two Vietnamese Marine battalions and two airborne battalions to the Da Nang Airbase in South Vietnamese transport aircraft. The sudden arrival of the four battalions came as a surprise for III MAF Headquarters, especially since the city had been quiet that night. Ky had made the move without consulting any of his American advisors. Whether an actual threat to the inhabitants of Da Nang did exist at that point was immaterial. In short order government forces controlled most of the city. They secured Vietnamese I Corps Headquarters, the police station, the city hall, the ARVN garrison barracks, and the radio station, and arrested Mayor Man and several Struggle Movement leaders. The rebels still occupied the Da Nang soccer field, several pagodas, and most of Tiensha Peninsula across the river from the city. General Dinh, the I Corps commander who had been attempting to negotiate with the Struggle Forces, was not a party to the government's move. In fact, he fled from his quarters only minutes ahead of a government armored column to the asylum of III MAF Headquarters.<sup>34</sup>

As during the April crisis, III MAF was caught in the middle and General Walt once more attempted to mediate. He radioed Major General William B. Rosson, the MACV Chief of Staff, about the situation in Da Nang since General Westmoreland at the time was visiting CinCPac Headquarters in Honolulu. Walt told Rosson that General Dinh had the support of most of the ARVN forces in I Corps and that he recommended that the government be urged to withdraw its Marine and airborne forces from Da Nang city. Later that morning, III MAF

received the MACV reply; Deputy Ambassador William J. Porter had relayed Walt's message to Premier Ky. MACV directed Walt, to "continue to do what we are doing. . . . Use good offices to prevent bloodshed."<sup>35</sup>

Several incidents involving South Vietnamese aircraft and U.S. Marine ground units occurred during the morning of 15 May. Two Vietnamese Air Force aircraft strafed ARVN units on Highway 1 north of Da Nang, near Marine positions. Later that morning, a small Vietnamese Air Force observation aircraft buzzed Marine ground positions near the strategic Nam O Bridge across the Cu De River north of Da Nang. It also dropped a cannister near a Marine truck on Highway 1 which contained the message, "Keep out of Da Nang because Da Nang has troubles." In response, General Platt, the III MAF Chief of Staff, radioed the U.S. advisor with the Vietnamese Air Force units at Da Nang, "Tell VNAF from General Walt that these dangerous incidents must cease and desist. VNAF's provocative

actions can lead to bloodshed. III MAF does not want bloodshed." The III MAF warning, for the time being, halted Vietnamese flights over Marine positions.<sup>36</sup>

The South Vietnamese Government was in no mood to compromise with the dissidents in I Corps. The Directorate rejected General Walt's advice to support the I Corps commander and to withdraw its forces from Da Nang, but on the morning of 16 May, Premier Ky replaced the I Corps Commander, General Dinh, with Major General Huynh Van Cao. Cao was not only a Catholic but had been the IV Corps commander under President Diem. His appointment hardly served to placate the militant Buddhist leaders of the Struggle Force.

The new I Corps commander soon learned the extent of dissident support in I Corps when he visited the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters in Hue on 17 May. Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan, the division commander, had refused to commit himself to the government's side and conveniently was sick

*South Vietnamese infantrymen supported by tanks enter Da Nang to put down the "Struggle Movement" in May. They arrested the mayor of the city and several of the leaders of the movement.*

Marine Corps Photo A193990



on the 17th so that he could not meet with Cao. After leaving Nhuan's headquarters where he was briefed by the division staff, General Cao, accompanied by Colonel Archelaus Hamblen, the senior U.S. Army advisor in I Corps, and General Platt, prepared to depart for Da Nang. An angry crowd had broken into the division compound so the trio hastily boarded the U.S. Army helicopter waiting for them. As the aircraft lifted off, an ARVN lieutenant fired two pistol shots at it at point blank range. Although not hitting any of the occupants, both rounds struck the helicopter. After the second shot, the U.S. Army helicopter gunner fired a six-round burst killing the ARVN lieutenant and wounding two other Vietnamese soldiers. The Struggle Forces immediately made the dead lieutenant a "martyr" to their cause and accused the Americans of blatant interference in South Vietnamese internal affairs.

The most dramatic confrontation between the American and the dissident forces occurred the following day, 18 May, at Da Nang and involved General Walt himself. By that morning the Vietnamese Marines had pushed to the western edge of the Da Nang River Bridge which connected Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. When they attempted to cross, they were fired on by Struggle Force troops entrenched on the other side. The leader of the dissident forces sent a message to General Cao that he had wired the bridge with demolitions and would destroy it if the Vietnamese Marines continued their advance. Cao relayed the message to General Walt. The bridge was a single span over which III MAF received much of its logistic support.

Indeed, all of the bridges in the Da Nang area were important. Da Nang is essentially an island city. Every exit from the city to the south, east, and northwest is by way of a major bridge and any force that controlled these points, controlled the city. General Walt, therefore, wanted to keep the Da Nang River Bridge intact and ordered Colonel Chaisson to work out a compromise between the government and the Struggle Forces.

Arriving at the bridge, the III MAF operations officer asked the Vietnamese Marine commander to pull back and allow American Marines to occupy their former positions. The Vietnamese commander readily agreed to Chaisson's proposal and Company M from the 3d Marines, then part of the airfield defense battalion, replaced the Vietnamese Marines on that side of the river. Before crossing the river to

talk with the rebel leader, Chaisson asked for a reinforced squad from the 3d Battalion to meet him on the eastern side.

Colonel Chaisson then flew across the river in a Marine helicopter and began negotiations with the Struggle Force commander. He was unable to persuade the Vietnamese to abandon their positions on the eastern bank. Chaisson then ordered Captain William F. Lee, the commanding officer of Company L, 3d Marines who had accompanied his reinforced squad to the other side, to move his troops into the dissident ARVN troop formation. The Americans advanced directly into the midst of the rebels and simply sat down; they made no attempt to dislodge the Vietnamese. Colonel Chaisson then boarded his helicopter and reported to General Walt.

Walt and Chaisson then returned to the bridge in Walt's staff car. According to Colonel Chaisson:

Walt and I went back down to the west side . . . in his car and we got out. He walked out on the bridge and I went out with him. And as we got to the east side this [Vietnamese] warrant officer walked out and told him to stop. This warrant officer showed that he was going to blow it up—take the whole three of us out.

The III MAF commander tried unsuccessfully to convince the Vietnamese officer to remove the demolitions. Chaisson vividly described the confrontation between the large Marine general and the small Vietnamese officer in the following manner:

Walt really gave him hell and was trying to intimidate him. The guy wasn't intimidating very much and so Walt said, "Well, I'm going to stay right here and send for a platoon of Marines." So he called this platoon of Marines . . . and this warrant officer . . . was holding his hand up as though he was going to give the signal to blow it and Walt stood right in there.<sup>37</sup>

General Walt in 1978 recalled:

. . . the Vietnamese warrant officer said in a very commanding voice, "General we will die together." He brought his raised arm down sharply to his side. There was no doubt that he expected the bridge to blow on his signal. I shall never forget the expression on his face when his signal did not blow up the bridge and us with it.<sup>38</sup>

The incident ended in somewhat of an anticlimax. Chaisson later related:

This platoon of Marines came from the west side and just came right across and went right through . . . an Army lieutenant, who'd been the advisor with this engineer outfit, went [alone] over the rail and went underneath and pulled off whatever the stuff was. And they did have it wired. Then Walt got back in his car and drove away. But

he really showed them it was a showdown and he called it and they did it.<sup>39</sup>

III MAF laconically reported to MACV: "After considerable debate ARVN engineers succeeded in removing the demolitions from bridge. . . . It is planned to use the bridge for civilian and U.S. military traffic commencing 19 May."<sup>40</sup>

Once the bridge incident was over, the focus of attention returned to the fighting in the city itself. The Struggle Forces had barricaded themselves in several pagodas and refused to surrender. The main point of resistance was the Tinh Hoi Pagoda where about 350 heavily-armed rebels held out against government troops. General Cao did not want unnecessary casualties and would not order a direct assault on the pagodas. The National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, went to the I Corps Headquarters where, according to Cao, the colonel pulled a gun and threatened his life unless Cao gave the order to attack. General Cao made a hasty retreat to the III MAF compound and asked General Walt for "asylum and transport to the United States."<sup>41</sup> Premier Ky did not relieve Cao; he simply named Brigadier General Du Quoc Dong as the acting I Corps commander. The following day, Ky recalled Colonel Loan to Saigon and directed the government forces not to attack the pagodas. The government

troops were to encircle each stronghold and starve out the defenders.

On the Tiensha Peninsula, the situation remained tense. The Struggle Forces continued to control the eastern bank of the Da Nang River and exchanged shots with government forces on the western bank. A large ARVN ammunition dump was adjacent to the new III MAF Headquarters compound being constructed on the peninsula. Captain Dinh Tan Thanh, the commanding officer of the 519th ARVN Ordnance Company, which controlled the supply point, threatened to blow up the dump if government troops crossed the river.

To prevent this, on 20 May, General Walt told the 9th Marines to move Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang from Chu Lai the previous month, to the new III MAF compound. The battalion was to occupy the site and be prepared to seize the ammunition dump which was just across the road.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley loaded two rifle companies on trucks at Marble Mountain and, supported by a platoon of tanks, headed north. After a brief delay at a Struggle Forces' roadblock, the Marines reached their destination. While the Marines were preparing defensive positions, Captain Thanh paid a visit to Lieutenant Colonel Kelley. Thanh vaguely hinted that if the Marines would guarantee his safety and that of his men he would consider turning the dump over to the Marines. The battalion commander relayed the gist of this conversation to III MAF Headquarters.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley had reason to be concerned about the safety of his troops. Firing across the river continued all night and into the morning of 21 May. Shortly after sunrise, a Vietnamese A-1 Skyraider made two strafing passes on the Marine positions, but no one was injured. Minutes later, two more Skyraiders fired into the compound with 20mm cannon and 2.75-inch rockets, wounding seven Marines. Apparently the Vietnamese Air Force pilots were after a rebel truck parked outside the perimeter fence, but missed their target.

General Walt warned the Vietnamese Air Force that if any further air attacks occurred, Marine jets would shoot down the Vietnamese planes. He later remembered that after the strafing incident he ordered four Marine A-4s to fly as a combat air patrol (CAP) over the four Vietnamese Skyraiders. The Vietnamese air commander then ordered:

*An aerial view of the bridge connecting Da Nang with the Tiensha Peninsula. The bridge was the site of a dramatic confrontation between Gen Walt and dissident forces.*

Navy Photo K-52114



... four more Skyraiders above our jets. I then ordered four more A-4's to fly CAP over the top of the second layer of Skyraiders. For over an hour I sat in the III MAF command center with two phones in my hand—one to the Marine air commander and the other to the Vietnamese air commander.

According to Walt, he cautioned the Vietnamese air commander:

... that if his planes fired one round, one rocket or dropped one bomb we would shoot all his planes out of the sky. On the other phone I told my Marine air commander to be prepared to immediately carry out my order. Finally having been convinced I meant what I said the Vietnamese commander gave orders for his planes to land at the airfield and the crisis was past.<sup>42</sup>

There were no further air strikes, but later that morning the 2d Battalion came under mortar attack from the rebel side. Eight more Marines were wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley warned the insurgents that he would retaliate if there were any more provocations. There were none.

During the next two days, the Marines attempted to convince the ARVN dissidents to surrender the ammunition dump to the Americans. Finally at 0200 on 23 May, Captain Thanh, fearing the Vietnamese Marines were preparing to attack, told Lieutenant Colonel Kelley that he was willing to turn over the dump. For the next two hours, the officers ironed out the details of a 15-point agreement. Thanh was extremely meticulous and insisted that every word be approved by other members of the local Struggle Force committee. Kelley only insisted that the Marines be able to bring tanks into the dump, a point which Thanh conceded. After completing the final draft of the document, the two men conducted a tour of the installation. At 0530, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley brought the text of the agreement to General Walt, who gave it his approval. At 0800, two M-48 tanks followed by a Marine company entered the dump.<sup>43</sup>

Although not related to the incident at the ammunition depot, the entire Struggle Movement in Da Nang collapsed on 23 May. At 1400, the dissidents in the Tinh Hoi Pagodas surrendered; the loyalist troops disarmed 325 rebels, removed 33 bodies, and recovered over 1,300 weapons. All ARVN troops sympathetic to the Struggle Movement returned to their former units. The Directorate appointed Lieutenant Colonel Le Chi Cuong to replace the imprisoned Nguyen Van Man as mayor of Da Nang and by the evening of the 23d, the city

had returned to normal. All told, about 150 Vietnamese on both sides were killed during the fighting in Da Nang and another 700 wounded. American casualties were 23 wounded, including 18 Marines.<sup>44</sup>

The end of the Struggle Movement in Da Nang apparently convinced General Thi to abandon any hope for a return to power. He conferred with General Westmoreland on 24 May and reluctantly agreed to meet with Premier Ky to discuss their differences. Three days later the two met at Chu Lai.\* Thi stated that he only wanted what was best for the Vietnamese people and that he was not a puppet of the Buddhists. According to Thi, the Struggle Forces lacked discipline and he offered to cooperate fully with the premier. Ky decided that the former Corps commander would be most "helpful" if he left I Corps and shortly after the meeting Thi left for Da Lat to await reassignment. Later in the year, General Thi and his family went into exile in Washington, D.C.

Before leaving I Corps, Thi tried to persuade General Cao at Da Nang to return to I Corps Headquarters and work for a final settlement. General Cao refused since he still feared for his personal safety and that of his family. Indeed, he wrote a letter to General Westmoreland:

... asking for asylum in the United States where he would like "to become an American citizen, to join the Marines or the Army, to fight against the Communists. . . . My wife and children will be safe in your country, and I will do my best to serve freedom and the United States."<sup>45</sup>

In any event, recognizing that Cao was unacceptable to Ky, the Directorate named the loyal 2d ARVN Division commander, Brigadier General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps commander.

Despite Thi's departure, the situation in Hue continued to deteriorate. The most radical of the Buddhist leaders had taken control. The day before the

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Alex Lee, who at the time, as a captain, commanded Company F, 7th Marines, recalled that Companies E and F of the 2d Battalion had the assignment to guard the Chu Lai strip during the meeting. According to Lee, there was "an unending stream of rumors and counterrumors concerning possible VC attack, NVA attack, and possible RVN unit attack. None of these rumors came true; however, it was a hot dusty and very tense time to wait developments with little or nothing in the way of valid information." LtCol Alex Lee, Comments on draft MS, dtd 26May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187170

*Gen Walt (right) greets MajGen Hoang Xuan Lam (left), upon his arrival at Da Nang to assume command of I Corps. Lam, the former Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division, was the last in a rapid succession of I Corps commanders after the removal of Gen Thi.*

Chu Lai conference, an estimated 10,000 people filed through the streets of Hue in a massive funeral procession for the young Vietnamese officer who had fired on General Cao's helicopter. After the funeral, 300 students marched on the United States Information Services Library. While police and ARVN soldiers watched, the mob smashed windows, set books and furniture ablaze, and even pried the brass lettering off the face of the library. All that remained of the modern, two-story structure was a burned-out shell.

On 29 May, the radicals employed a familiar but most gruesome tactic. A Buddhist nun sat down in front of a pagoda in Hue, doused her robe with gasoline, and set herself on fire. That night, another nun followed suit in front of the Saigon Buddhist Institute and next morning a monk did the same in Da Lat. In a press conference, Tri Quang stated that

President Johnson was responsible for the fiery suicides and several days later he began a much-publicized hunger strike to protest American support of the Vietnamese Government.

On 1 June, the protests were once more aimed at the Americans. Intelligence reports indicated that a mob planned to attack the U.S. consulate at Hue. The staff therefore destroyed all classified material and evacuated the building. Before leaving, the U.S. consul contacted General Nhuan and asked for troops to protect the building. The 1st ARVN Division commander complied, but his guards hastily departed when a mob of 800 protesters stormed the mission. After first stoning the building, the mob broke down the door and set the consulate on fire with barrels of gasoline. It then moved next door where it sacked and burned the residence of the U.S. administrative assistant. The homes of the Thua



Thien province chief and other Vietnamese officials also went up in flames.

As a result of the increasing violence, the government granted additional concessions to the Buddhists. At a meeting of the Armed Forces Council on 6 June, the Directorate was enlarged to include 10 civilian members, two of whom were Buddhists. A week later, Premier Ky established a predominantly civilian 80-man People-Army Council to advise the government on political, economic, and social matters. These changes in Saigon did not satisfy the dissidents. Those Buddhists who had been installed in the government were not official representatives of the Buddhist Institute and both Tam Chau and Tri Quang continued to voice their opposition to the existing administration.

The Buddhists also employed a nonviolent harassing tactic. In Da Nang, Hue, Quang Tri, and Qui Nhon, they began placing family altars and statues in the streets. All U.S. personnel were ordered not to touch the religious figures since the desecration of one could precipitate an incident. In Da Nang, the cluttered streets snarled traffic and General Walt restricted the use of vehicles. The movement of supplies from the piers came to a halt. The I Corps commander, General Lam, ordered the police to remove all shrines; this was accomplished in Da Nang. In Hue, however, the 1st ARVN Division troops and National Police refused to touch the altars.\*

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\*Several Marine commanders stationed near Phu Bai during this period remarked in their comments on the inconvenience caused by the Buddhist demonstrations. Colonel Samuel M. Morrow, then a major and commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, remembered that "... the Buddhists would set shrines down the middle of Highway 1 making the passage of trucks and self-propelled artillery virtually impossible for fear of knocking one of them over. ..." Col Samuel M. Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Sumner A. Vale, then commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled that the altars "... were not placed in the center of the highway but enough off-center so that a 2½-ton truck could still use the road." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Ralph E. Sullivan, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, commented that during the Buddhist difficulties in Hue, "... nearly all our resupply was by helo. Since ammo had first priority, we frequently got only one meal of C's per day. We made up the other two meals from captured rice, sweet corn, and peanuts." LtCol Ralph E. Sullivan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

At this time, Premier Ky decided to act. He ordered General Lam to rectify the situation in Hue. On 10 June, Lam airlifted 300 riot control police to the old imperial capital. Two days later, the first of four government battalions arrived and the National Police Chief, Colonel Loan, took command of final operations against the rebels.

This time the government forces acted with restraint and there was little fighting. While clearing the streets, the Vietnamese policemen bowed three times and then carefully removed each altar. Those demonstrators who refused to disperse were quickly hustled into waiting trucks and rushed off to jail. In breaking up the few last protest marches, ARVN troops used tear gas instead of bullets. The main areas of resistance were located in the Citadel and near two Buddhist pagodas, but by the evening of 18 June Colonel Loan's unit had neutralized these strongholds. With the arrest of key rebel leaders and the ousting of General Nhuan as the 1st ARVN Division's commander, the Struggle Movement disintegrated. By morning, the government had reestablished its control of Hue.

Throughout the crisis period, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Lodge backed Premier Ky and the Directorate. Their cooperation, especially during April when the Vietnamese Marines arrived at Da Nang, placed General Walt in a difficult position. He viewed the situation differently than MACV. Walt had an extremely close relationship, both professionally and personally, with General Thi. The Marines considered Thi a good, competent commander who had been effectively prosecuting the war in I Corps. His removal was a disappointment to III MAF.<sup>46\*\*</sup>

The Marines were not anti-Ky. Their main interest was to get on with the war, and each move by the government, be it a troop deployment, an inflammatory public announcement, or a removal of a key

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\*\*One veteran Marine commander observed in his comments: "... it would appear that the natural (and healthy) differences and professional rivalry between [U.S.] Marine and [U.S.] Army sort of played into the hands of the political differences between Ky and Thi in this one instance. Of course the geographic separation of Walt from Westmoreland, coupled with the proximity of Thi to the former and Ky to the latter, also aggravated the situation. I think it's even more to General Walt's credit that he managed this situation so expertly." Col Leon N. Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Struggle leader, caused reverberations throughout I Corps. The parade of corps commanders through Da Nang, finally ending with the appointment of Lam, also complicated the Marine task. Colonel Chaisson, much later, expressed the fears of the Marine command when he stated:

If we'd got ourselves in a position with the government forces fighting the local forces up there, and particularly if we had been caught in the middle of it and there'd been

any significant U.S. casualties, I have a feeling that the U.S. Government would have probably pulled out of the war right then and there.<sup>47</sup>

The fact of the matter was that the Saigon forces put down the revolt without a full civil war, thus, Ky and the Directorate achieved temporary solidification of their government at the expense of a certain amount of instability in I Corps.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Advance to the Ky Lam

*April Actions and Operation Georgia—The May Ky Lam Campaign—Operation Liberty*

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### *April Actions and Operation Georgia*

The spring political crisis caused a serious disruption of Marine offensive operations at Da Nang. With the sudden arrival of Vietnamese Marine battalions at the Da Nang Airbase in April, the U.S. Marine regiments in Quang Nam Province suddenly found themselves with a new mission. They not only had to fight a war against the Communists, but also to prevent one between government troops and the Struggle Forces. Colonel Simmons compared the role of his regiment to that of the "ham in the sandwich," the filler to absorb the shock of the confrontation between the two opposing sides.<sup>1</sup>

This situation could only benefit the Communists. The 9th Marines had to revert to the defensive because of the threat to the security of Da Nang created by the polarization of the ARVN forces into hostile factions. With the abandonment of several government outposts along Route 4 and vast amounts of ammunition, the VC not only rearmed at GVN expense, but reentered the area the Marines had just cleared during Operation Kings.\*

On 16 April, an old enemy, the R-20 "*Doc Lap*" Battalion, attacked one of the companies from Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in position north of the abandoned 39th Ranger outpost at Phong Thu. Company H, commanded by Captain Everette S. Roane, had established defensive positions north of Route 4, and

put a squad ambush south of the road. Suddenly, at 0400, the enemy opened up with recoilless rifle and mortar fire. Simultaneously, the enemy launched two company-size assaults, one from the southeast and the other from the southwest. The attack from the southwest, about 100 men, ran into a Marine ambush and stalled. According to the Marine squad leader, his men "shot 12-15 VC for sure—most likely more." At dawn the following morning, the squad found two enemy bodies in front of its position.<sup>2</sup>

The approximately 150-man force attacking from the southeast reached the north side of Route 4, but was unable to penetrate the Marine company's perimeter. As soon as the attackers crossed the road:

The VC were like ducks in a shooting gallery. Many VC were shot as they crossed the road and went down into the paddy in front of the 2d Platoon. At one point, 22 VC bodies could be counted in that vicinity. Other VC were shot as they attempted to remove bodies. During the lulls in illumination, as bodies would be removed and more VC would cross the road, there would be more bodies.<sup>3</sup>

Marine aerial observers arrived overhead and as Marine artillery responded, the enemy's supporting mortars and recoilless rifles fell silent. The VC ground assault dissipated, and the attacking force broke up into small groups. Enemy probes continued along the Marine company perimeter, but, "this most likely was to cover the collection of VC casualties and the withdrawal of the main force."<sup>4</sup>

At first light, the Marines counted 12 enemy bodies, but estimated killing another 63. Company H had not gone unscathed, suffering seven dead and 37 wounded, largely as a result of the enemy's recoilless rifle and mortar attack.<sup>5</sup>

In mid-April the 9th Marines resumed the initiative, following the temporary standoff of the political crisis. Originally, the regiment planned to follow Kings with a one-battalion operation beginning on 10 April in the An Hoa region south of the Ky Lam and Thu Bon. Thus, the Marines would

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\*Colonel Nicholas J. Dennis, the commanding officer of the 3d Engineer Battalion in early 1966, commented that he vividly recalled "a request . . . for engineers to clear mines and booby traps from one of the abandoned ARVN encampments on Route 4." He and his engineers came under a night attack from the VC before the job was done and his engineers sustained four casualties, including one man killed. Col Nicholas J. Dennis, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File). 92

carry out General Walt's promise to Mr. Can, the An Hoa project leader, that III MAF would protect the industrial complex there. Though unable to meet the original date, the 9th Marines completed its revised order for Operation Georgia by 14 April. The mission was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Taylor's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines.<sup>6</sup>

With the completion of the planning, the 9th Marines battalions began preliminary preparations for the operation. On 18 April, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Da Nang three days earlier, relieved the 3d Battalion on the eastern flank of the 9th Marines area of operations. Both Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion and Taylor's 3d Battalion then reentered the former Kings area of operations in conjunction with ARVN and Vietnamese militia forces. Their assignment was not only to eradicate the VC but to determine suitable LVT river-crossing sites and assembly and resupply points for the forthcoming operation.

Although the operation had not officially begun, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor established a forward base at the An Hoa airstrip on 20 April. Helicopters from MAG-16 lifted the command group and Company L from Marble Mountain while Air Force C-123s, as in Operation Mallard, flew in an artillery battery, Battery F, 12th Marines.

On the 21st, the designated date for the start of the operation, the rear headquarters and two rifle companies, supported by a platoon of LVTHs from Company B, 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, moved overland toward the objective area. A third company, Company I, 9th Marines, arrived at An Hoa by helicopter and Air Force transports brought in a second 105mm battery, Battery B, 12th Marines. Both fixed-wing transports and helicopters continued to fly in supplies for the An Hoa buildup. On 22 April, Company L linked up with the LVT convoy after it had crossed the Thu Bon River.

With the establishment of the An Hoa base, the battalion began the second phase of the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor had divided the An Hoa region into 20 well-defined, company-size TAORs and the Marines, with local ARVN and South Vietnamese Popular Forces, began a series of actions, using tactics similar to those used during Operation Kings. Combining County Fair and Golden Fleece techniques, the Marines attempted to secure the



Marine Corps Photo A186933

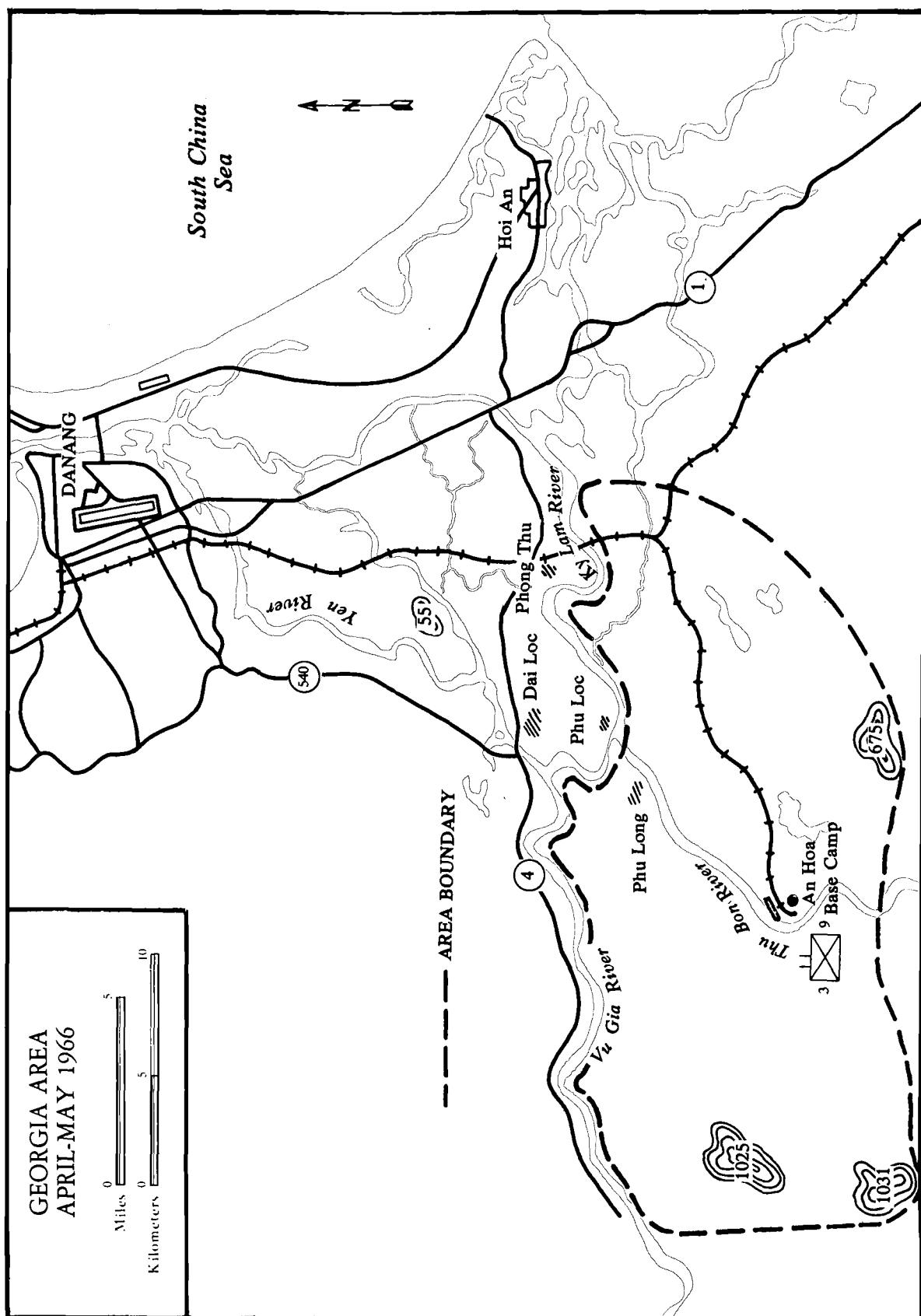
*Le Thuc Can, project leader of the An Hoa Industrial Complex (center), discusses plans with Gen Walt and LtCol William W. Taylor (left), Commanding Officer, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. The battalion is about to reenter the An Hoa region in Operation Georgia.*

hamlets surrounding the An Hoa base in order that the industrial complex there could become a reality.

Despite intelligence reports indicating the presence of the VC V-25 (5th VC) Battalion in the western sector of the Georgia zone of action, that area between the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, the Marines encountered little opposition through the end of April, only harassing fire and mines. Marine aerial observers and a platoon from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, supporting the operation, accounted for most of the VC sightings at this stage. Air observers and reconnaissance Marines "frequently detected movement of small enemy forces at long range and directed artillery fire at the VC with telling effect."<sup>7</sup> Major Samuel M. Morrow, commander of the provisional artillery group at An Hoa, commented that although some:

. . . very fine targets were observed and some excellent missions . . . fired, there was a tendency on the part of these untrained observers [the reconnaissance Marines] to enter fire for effect too early and attempt to "chase the target" rather than reenter the adjustment phase. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Yet the reconnaissance outposts on the southern and



western fringes of the Georgia operating area controlled 36 artillery missions and six air strikes, resulting in at least 30 enemy dead.<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Paul C. Trammell, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel Taylor in early May as the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, later recalled that although Major Morrow expressed his doubts about the “effectiveness of the recon teams in fire adjustment,” the artillery commander afterwards “conceded that the concept worked well.”<sup>10</sup>

The heaviest action of Operation Georgia occurred on 3 May. Captain George R. Griggs’ Company M, 9th Marines, which had just relieved another company during the operation, prepared to cross the Thu Bon. Its objective was the hamlet of Phu Long (1) on the northern bank of the river in the north-central sector of the Georgia area. During the river crossing, an estimated one- to two-company enemy force, later identified as being from the ubiquitous *R-20 Battalion*, opened fire on the Marine company in LVTs. In a four-hour firefight lasting through the afternoon, Griggs’ company, reinforced by two other Marine companies and supported by air and artillery, finally secured Phu Long (1). LVTHs, which accompanied the Marines in the river crossing, brought direct fire upon the enemy positions and



Marine Corps Photo A187160  
*A 60mm mortar team from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in Operation Georgia has just fired off a round at a VC sniper.*

*A Marine appears to be watching over a pastoral scene during Operation Georgia. Smoke, however, can be seen rising where Marines have destroyed a VC bunker.*

Marine Corps Photo A187042





Marine Corps Photo A187050

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines engage the VC in a firefight during Operation Georgia. The Marine on the left appears to be reaching for a clip to reload his M14 rifle.*

*As Marines from the 3d Battalion watch, a VC suspect raises his hands in surrender and comes out of his bunker. The Viet Cong made effective use of bunkers, fighting holes, and underground tunnels.*

Marine Corps Photo A187024



were "instrumental in neutralizing enemy fire and preventing more casualties."<sup>11</sup> During the engagement, the Marines suffered five dead and 54 wounded. They killed 15 of the VC and estimated that they had inflicted another 100 casualties.

Although technically ending on 10 May, Georgia, like Kings before it, was in reality an extension of the Marine area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Trammell held his command post and two rifle companies, reinforced by an artillery battery from the 12th Marines at the An Hoa base. The final reports of Georgia indicated that a favorable kill ratio had been achieved, 103 confirmed VC dead at a cost of nine Marines killed and 94 wounded.

### *The May Ky Lam Campaign*

Taking advantage of the truce in the political situation, on 4 May, Colonel Simmons published a

plan for a renewed offensive above the Ky Lam River. The Ky Lam Campaign, named after the river, was to be a three-phased advance "to clear the regimental zone of action of organized resistance south to the line of the Thu Bon-Ky Lam-Dien Binh-Cau Lau-Hoi An Rivers."<sup>12</sup> At the end of May, the forward battalions were to reach Phase Line Brown, a line which extended from below Dai Loc in the west and followed the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers eastward, with the exception of a 2,000 meter-wide horseshoe-shaped salient extending south 5,000 meters along both sides of Route 1 to just above Dien Ban. In June, the regiment was to begin the second phase of the operation, securing all of Route 4 west of Route 1 and extending the Marines' lines down to the Ky Lam. During July, the 9th Marines, in the final phase of the campaign, was to advance southward in the region east of Route 1 and incorporate the city of Hoi An in its area of responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of operations for the offensive required the same "scrubbing" tactics used in Kings and Georgia. Battalions were "to deploy their companies in a diamond configuration, terrain permitting, and to employ all supporting arms imaginatively and vigorously."<sup>14</sup> Colonel Simmons later explained that the failure to use air and artillery in the past had resulted in needless Marine casualties. He believed that the American command had to take a realistic attitude toward civilian casualties. The selective employment of supporting arms did not by itself increase the number of civilians killed and wounded, but did cause the inhabitants of contested hamlets to abandon their homes, thus becoming refugees. Simmons viewed the refugee from his perspective as an asset, "a person who had made his election physically to move over to our side." The removal of refugees from the hamlets in the uncleared area made the Marine task of identifying and eradicating the VC that much easier. The cost of housing, feeding these refugees, and rebuilding their hamlets, if necessary, was considered a minimal price to pay.<sup>15</sup>

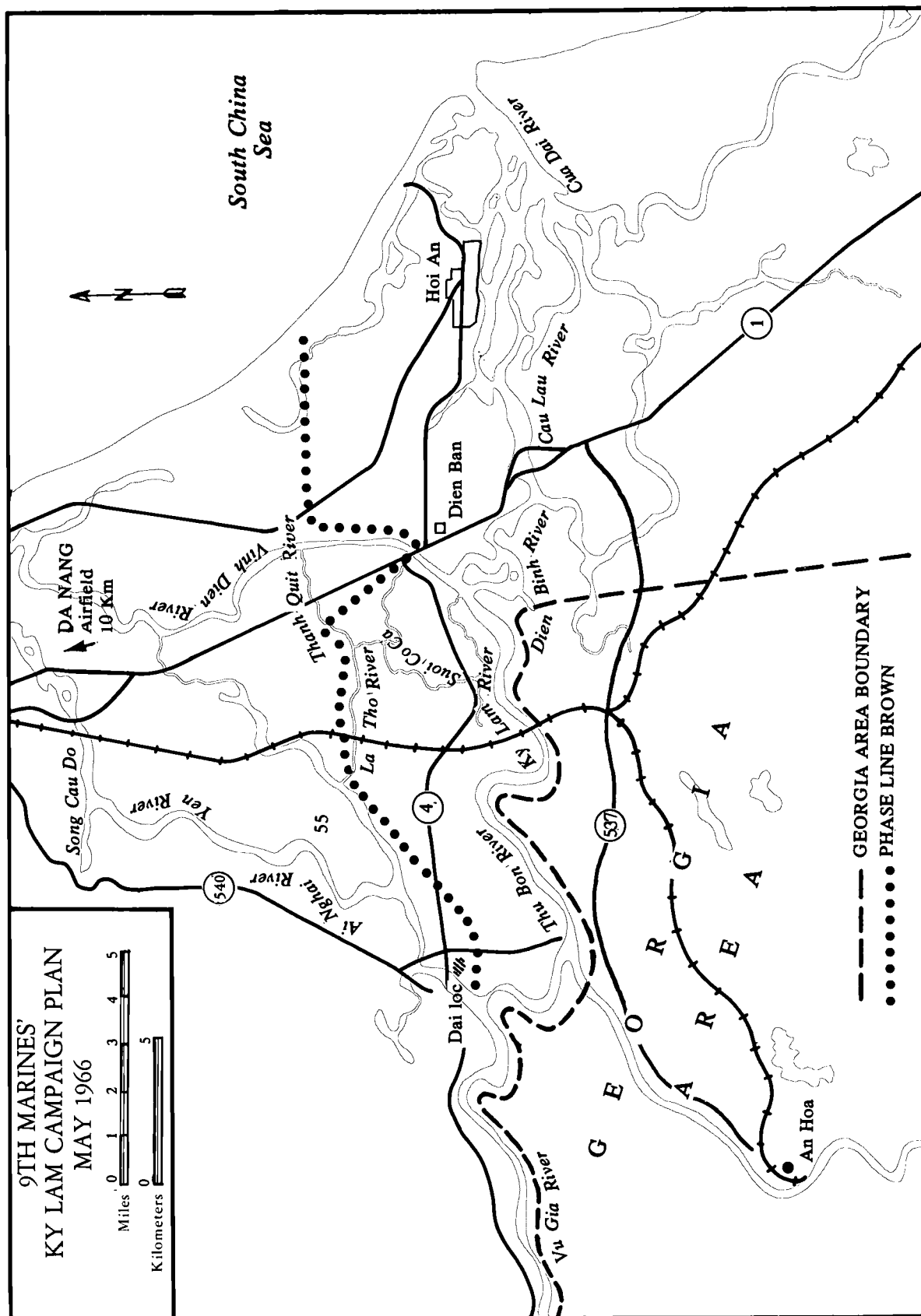
For the Ky Lam Campaign, Colonel Simmons had four infantry battalions under his operational control. These were the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and all three 9th Marines battalions, including the 3d Battalion in An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel William F. Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, which had been the Da Nang Base Defense Battalion, became

available for the campaign when relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Dorsey's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. Doehler's battalion inherited Dorsey's responsibility for the 9th Marines' western sector.

The heaviest fighting in the early stages of the campaign was in Doehler's zone of action. On 10 May, he had established the battalion's forward command post in Dai Loc. His Company B, commanded by Captain Norman E. Henry, was on the eastern bank of the Vu Gia, 3,500 meters south of Dai Loc to provide a covering force for units leaving the Georgia area of operations. That morning, Company A, 9th Marines, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Battalion during Operation Georgia, crossed the Vu Gia in LVTs and rejoined its parent battalion at Dai Loc. After the river crossing, Company A prepared for a clearing operation around the town of Dai Loc, while Henry's company made preparations for a similar operation in southern Dai Loc District above the Thu Bon. Allied intelligence sources indicated that the *R-20 Battalion* had reinfiltrated this area. A report received on 11 May stated that a company of the battalion was in the hamlet of Do Nam near a small finger lake, 2,000 meters northeast of Company B's position.<sup>16</sup>

On the morning of 12 May, one of Henry's patrols unexpectedly came upon the enemy. The 14-man squad had left the company CP at 0630, moving east. One hour later, the patrol reported that it had come under small arms fire and captured a VC suspect. Encountering no further resistance, the Marines continued their patrol. At 0830, the squad leader radioed back that a water buffalo was in its path. Captain Henry ordered the squad to avoid the animal, but "if threatened by it, they were given permission to shoot." In the squad's next report, about 30 minutes later, the Marines stated that they had wounded the buffalo and were giving chase to finish it off. Fifteen minutes after that, the patrol reported harassing fire and seeing Viet Cong fleeing to the east "and that the patrol was giving physical pursuit." The patrol leader asked for supporting mortar fire. Company B's mortar section fired an 81mm ranging round, but the patrol was unable to observe its impact. Captain Henry ordered his mortars to cease firing, fearing that they might hit his own men. About that time, the company lost radio contact with the patrol.

The company commander sent out a second squad to follow the route of the first patrol. The second





squad came under small arms and mortar fire itself. The Marines countered with mortar fire from the company base area which silenced the enemy's weapons. About 1030, the squad leader reported hearing a "heavy volume of small arms fire, mortars, M79s, and hand grenades due east of their position," near the village of Do Nam. Believing that he had found the missing Marines, he asked for an aerial observer.

Although no Marine observation aircraft was available, "an Army AO [aerial observer] happened into the area and reported an apparent firefight" in the vicinity of the action recently reported by the second squad. The Army aircraft dropped a red smoke grenade in the village of Do Nam and fired four rockets into a trenchline in front of the Marines. Making another pass, the Army AO threw out two messages to the Marines below, informing them that there were 20 VC in the trench line.

By this time, Captain Henry decided to move the rest of his company to support his embattled Marines. By 1145 he had established a 500-meter defensive line near the village of Hoa Tay, 500 meters southwest of the second squad's position. The company commander then ordered the squad, which had suffered five heat casualties, to pull back to the company lines. By 1230, the entire company was heavily engaged. The company's 81mm and 60mm mortars failed to silence the enemy's weapons and Henry asked for artillery and air support. After an artillery mission fired by the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, the action died down for about 20 minutes. At noon, the enemy opened up again with small arms and mortars, but by this time F-4Bs from VMFA-542 were overhead. The jets' first runs on the entrenched VC in Do Nam once more temporarily silenced the enemy.

Following the air strikes, about 1320, Captain Henry's men spotted two Marines crossing an open field toward their lines. Henry ordered "a base of fire and mortar fire" to cover the two men. Both Marines were from the first patrol and badly wounded. The company commander asked them, before they went under sedation, where the rest of the squad was. The men vaguely pointed in a general direction to the northeast and said that they were all dead. Before being overrun, the wounded men claimed that the patrol had killed 30 of the enemy.

Despite poor communications, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler had been able to follow the course of

the Company B action. Through "fragments of information which had sifted through," the Marine battalion commander believed that his company had encountered the *R-20 Battalion*. He had just received an intelligence report that two companies of the *R-20* had reinforced the enemy company already in the area "to ambush Marine units operating in the area." Doehler ironically remarked later that since Company B was heavily engaged at the time, "it was considered to be an accurate if not timely report."

Shortly after 1330, the 1st Battalion commander decided to reinforce his Company B. After some initial problems in obtaining helicopter support, he moved Company D and a platoon from Company A to link up with Henry's company. By 1815, the three Marine units were consolidated in a 360-degree defensive perimeter around the hamlet of Hoa Tay.

By this time, Marine air and artillery had broken the back of enemy resistance. F-4Bs, F-8s, and A-4s from VMFA-542, VMF(AW)-235, and VMA-214, respectively, joined UH-1E gunships from VMO-2 in 27 close air support missions. Nine airstrikes were run at half-hour intervals. Marine artillery had fired 242 supporting rounds. The combination of air and artillery apparently inflicted heavy casualties on the VC. According to Doehler, the supporting arms disorganized the enemy, forcing them to break up into small groups. Later interrogation of the villagers revealed that these small bands of VC had slipped back across the Thu Bon during the night of 12 May. They had forced civilians in the hamlets to carry their dead and wounded.

On the morning of 13 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP into Hoa Tay and prepared to conduct a two-company search and clear operation. That afternoon Company B recovered the bodies of the 12 missing Marines near the western tip of the small finger lake. For the next two days the battalion carried out a series of cordons and searches in the area of southern Dai Loc District containing the hamlets of Hoa Tay, Hoa Nam, and Giao Thuy (2) and (3).

This entire sector contained a series of heavily fortified hamlets interspersed among large, open fields. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler described the village defenses as formidable, observing:

A complex network of trenches surrounded each of the villages. In many cases, communication trenches extended from village to village. These trenches typically were four



Marine Corps Photo A187064

*Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines recover the bodies of the men from the unit's lost patrol. The VC had overrun the Marine squad, killing 12 of its 14 members.*

to six feet deep with firing positions located every few meters. At the bottom of the trenches, tunnels were dug back into the ground to provide overhead cover. . . . In some places bamboo-lined bunkers were found, some of which were underground and some above ground.

The Marines found the villagers of Hoa Nam and Giao Thuy "cooperative and fairly talkative as long as they were alone with an interpreter and an interrogator." They told what they knew about VC movements in the area and in several cases volunteered the names of VC guerrillas living in their hamlets.

The Marine battalion was unable to take advantage of this intelligence. The renewal of the political crisis on 15 May, signaled by the arrival of the South Vietnamese Marines at Da Nang, forced Lieutenant Colonel Doehler to cut short the operation on that date. Once more the ARVN units south of Da Nang divided into opposing factions and abandoned their outposts along Route 4. Lieutenant Colonel Doehler moved his CP back to Hill 55, and his battalion was again on the defensive.

During the first two weeks in May, the other 9th Marines' battalions conducted similar scrubbing actions in their respective sectors, but encountered only harassing fire and mines. With renewed political troubles in Da Nang, they too returned to their former positions. The regiment's offensive ground to a halt. Nevertheless, in the three-day period from 12-15 May, Doehler's battalion claimed to have killed 57 of the enemy. One later intelligence source indicated that the VC casualties may have been as high

as 150 dead. The Marine battalion suffered 15 killed, 17 wounded, and 10 nonbattle casualties.\*

With the Marines on the defensive south of Da Nang, the enemy tried to exploit the chaotic situation caused by the political crisis. On 21 May, Lieutenant Colonel Doehler's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines met the *R-20 Battalion* again. The enemy unit had infiltrated the hamlet of An Trach, a former model village for Marine Corps civic action, located north of Hill 55. At 1115 a Company C squad made contact with 40 to 50 VC 500 meters across the Yen River from An Trach (1). The fighting escalated into a fierce engagement extending across both banks of the river. In a seven-hour battle, Companies A and C, reinforced by Sparrow Hawk squads, M-48 tanks, and supported by air and artillery, defeated two companies of the *R-20*. According to the 3d Marine Division account:

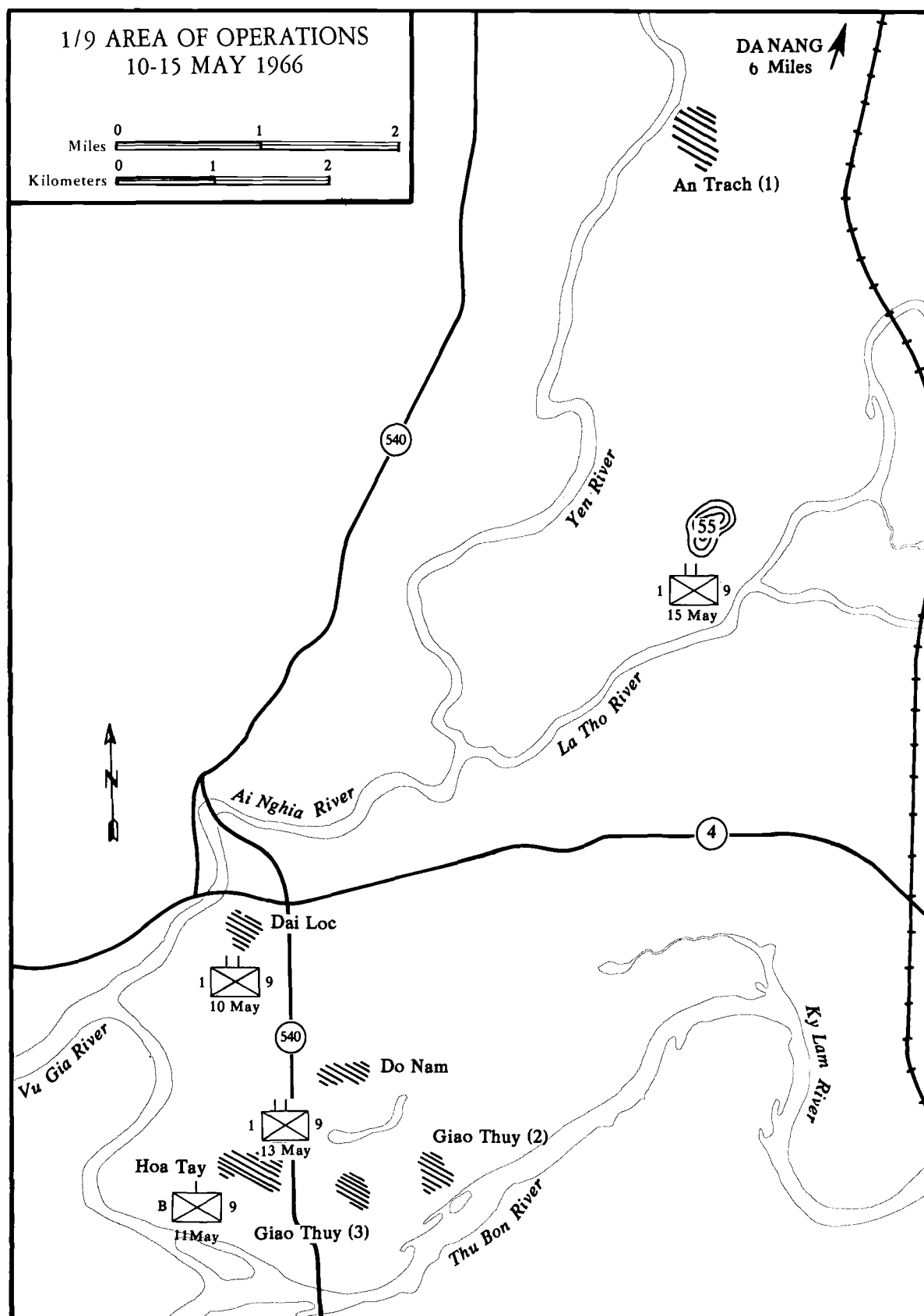
In the initial stages of the contact, the Viet Cong fought from trenches until they were overrun by Marines. Later, Viet Cong were seen attempting to run from the Marines, even digging frantically, to evade contact with Marine units. During the later stages . . . the Viet Cong became very confused and appeared to be without leadership.<sup>17</sup>

In the day's fighting, the battalion killed 53 enemy and possibly another 83, but suffered 12 dead and 31 wounded.<sup>18</sup>

Colonel Simmons observed that all of the regiment's significant contacts during May resulted from VC initiative. The enemy would begin the action when the Marines were at a disadvantage, either because of numbers or terrain, and in some cases because of both. The Marines, nevertheless, eventually attained the upper hand. For the entire month, the 9th Marines killed more than 270 of the enemy; 75 Marines died, 328 were wounded. Over 50 percent of the Marine casualties in May were caused by enemy mines and explosive devices, many of them made from equipment abandoned by the

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\*Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., who during this period was the 3d Marine Division G-2, recalled, ". . . they told Bill Doehler to confirm body counts . . . he replied there is not a damn, single [enemy] body out here. We had to pause for about three full days in counting bodies, in order to allow the totals to catch up with what [was] already reported." Col George W. Carrington, Jr., Comments on draft MS, dtd 15May78 (Vietnam Comment File).



ARVN forces south of Da Nang. Colonel Simmons remarked upon the considerable increase of enemy incidents during the month, declaring that this upsurge was largely due to "the increased freedom of movement enjoyed by the Viet Cong in many outlying areas as the result of diminished GVN military activities during the periods of political instability . . . ." As a result, the regiment failed to reach Phase Line Brown on 31 May and the Ky Lam Campaign was behind schedule.<sup>19</sup>

### *Operation Liberty*

With the surrender of the Struggle Forces at Da Nang and the restoration of some stability there, the 9th Marines once more renewed its offensive, coordinated with the South Vietnamese. On 2 June, Colonel Lap, who had replaced Colonel Yeu as the Quang Da Special Sector commander, visited Colonel Simmons at his CP. The South Vietnamese commander wanted the 9th Marines to resume County Fair operations in the five-village pacification area. He assured Simmons that at least one battalion from the 51st ARVN Regiment would be committed to the pacification campaign. Following Lap's visit, Colonel Simmons revised portions of his previous orders. On 5 June, he ordered his battalions to renew County Fair operations with the Vietnamese and extended the deadline for the attainment of Phase Line Brown from 31 May to 20 June.<sup>20</sup>

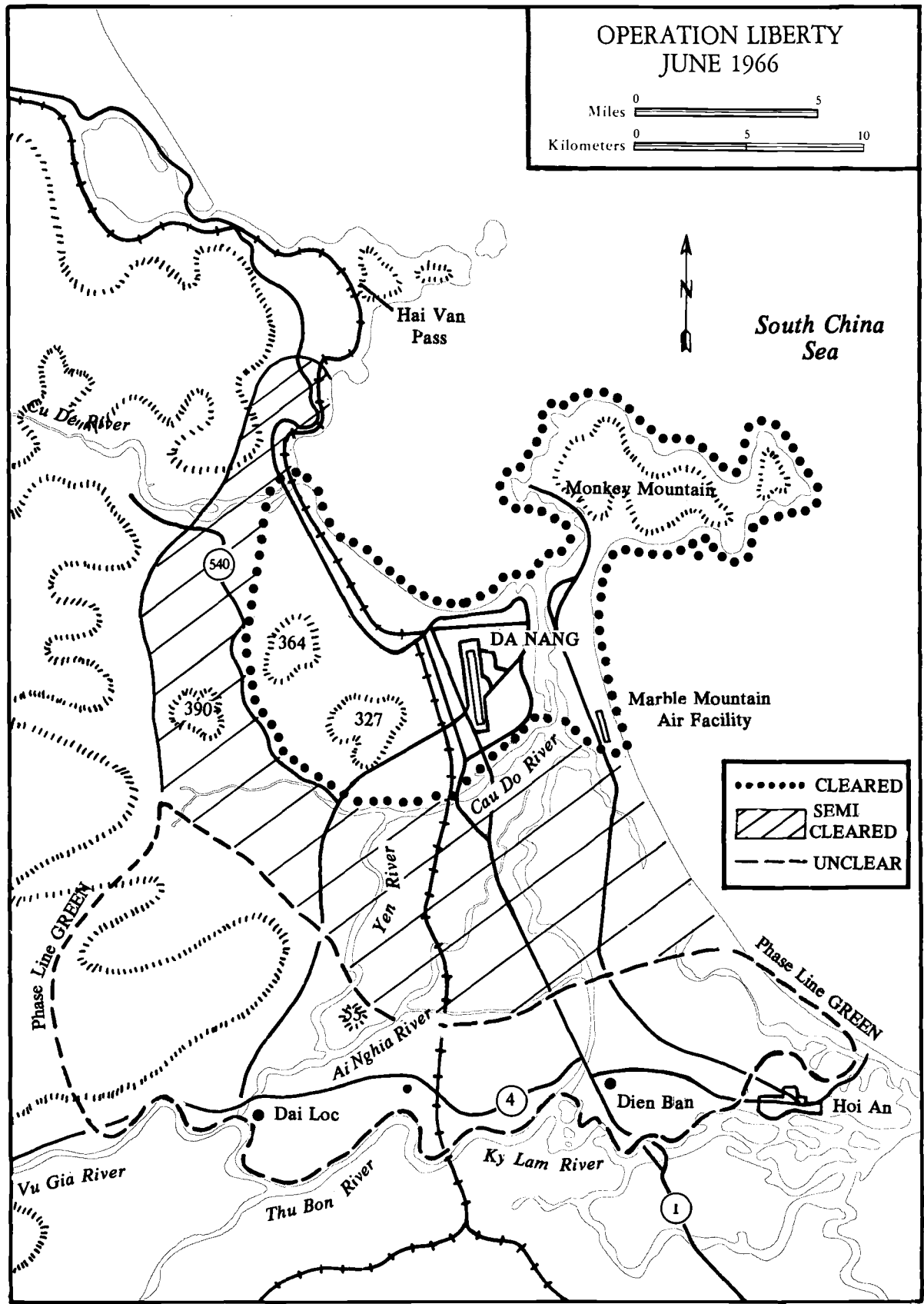
At this juncture, General Kyle decided to transform the 9th Marines Ky Lam Campaign into a division-size offensive, involving "a conventional linear type attack of all forward units to push the frontlines forward in a deliberate search and clear operation to include the cordon and search of every hamlet in the zone. . . ." He divided the Da Nang TAOR into three sectors: the cleared, the semicleared, and the uncleared. The cleared area formed an irregular arc around the Da Nang Airbase, delineated by the South China Sea to the east, the Cau Do to the south, the foothills to the west, and the Cu De River to the north. Extending the arc outward from the cleared area boundary, the semicleared sector reached the Thanh Quit River to the south, three to five kilometers into the high ground to the west and the Hai Van Pass to the north. The uncleared region consisted of the area between the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers and the banks of the Ky Lam-Thu Bon. Phase Line Green, the final phase line, paralleled the latter two rivers. The 3d Marine Division commander ordered that only minimum forces be held in the rear and set 30 June as the target date for reaching Phase Line Green.<sup>21</sup>

Continuing arrival of Marine reinforcements allowed General Kyle to make this all-out effort. On 28 May, the 1st MP Battalion arrived at Da Nang from the United States and relieved the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines of its airfield security mission. The 3d Battalion then returned to the operational

*Marines of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sit in a captured Viet Cong barracks and training site in Dai Loc District south of Da Nang. The site is near where the Marine lost patrol was overrun.*

Marine Corps Photo A187072





control of its parent regiment, taking over the 3d Marines western TAOR. Colonel Harold A. Hayes, Jr., who had relieved Colonel Fisher on 16 April as 3d Marines commander, at last had command of all three of his battalions. Other reinforcements were scheduled to arrive at Da Nang, or were already in place. Colonel Bryan B. Mitchell was slated to transfer his 1st Marines Headquarters from Chu Lai to Da Nang in June. In fact, two of his battalions had already moved by the end of May. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines arrived at Da Nang on 22 May while the 1st Battalion arrived on 31 May. Both battalions were temporarily placed under the operational control of the 9th Marines. The 3d Battalion became the regimental reserve; the 1st Battalion relieved the regiment's eastern flank battalion, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, which rejoined its parent regiment at Phu Bai.

By mid-June General Kyle could expect to have three Marine infantry regiments consisting of eight battalions at Da Nang. He planned to reduce the extensive 9th Marines TAOR by assigning the 1st Marines to the eastern flank while the 3d Marines took over that part of the 9th Marines TAOR west of the Yen River. In effect, Kyle visualized a shoulder-to-shoulder advance to the Ky Lam. The operation, codenamed Liberty, was scheduled to begin on 7 June, with the 9th Marines bearing the brunt of the campaign in its initial stages.

Colonel Simmons divided his TAOR into company-size objective areas. His reserve battalion, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, was to concentrate on combined operations with ARVN and Vietnamese local forces in the five-village pacification region in the semicleared area. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines was to continue its two-company holding action in the An Hoa region. All the remaining infantry companies were assigned to the three forward battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the eastern flank, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines in the center, and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on the western flank. Thus each forward battalion was to consist of five infantry companies instead of the usual four, with three companies deployed to the front and two to the rear. The advancing battalions were to secure Route 4 by 20 June and reach the Ky Lam by the end of the month.<sup>22</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr.'s 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, on the division's left, had its heaviest engagement just before Operation Liberty

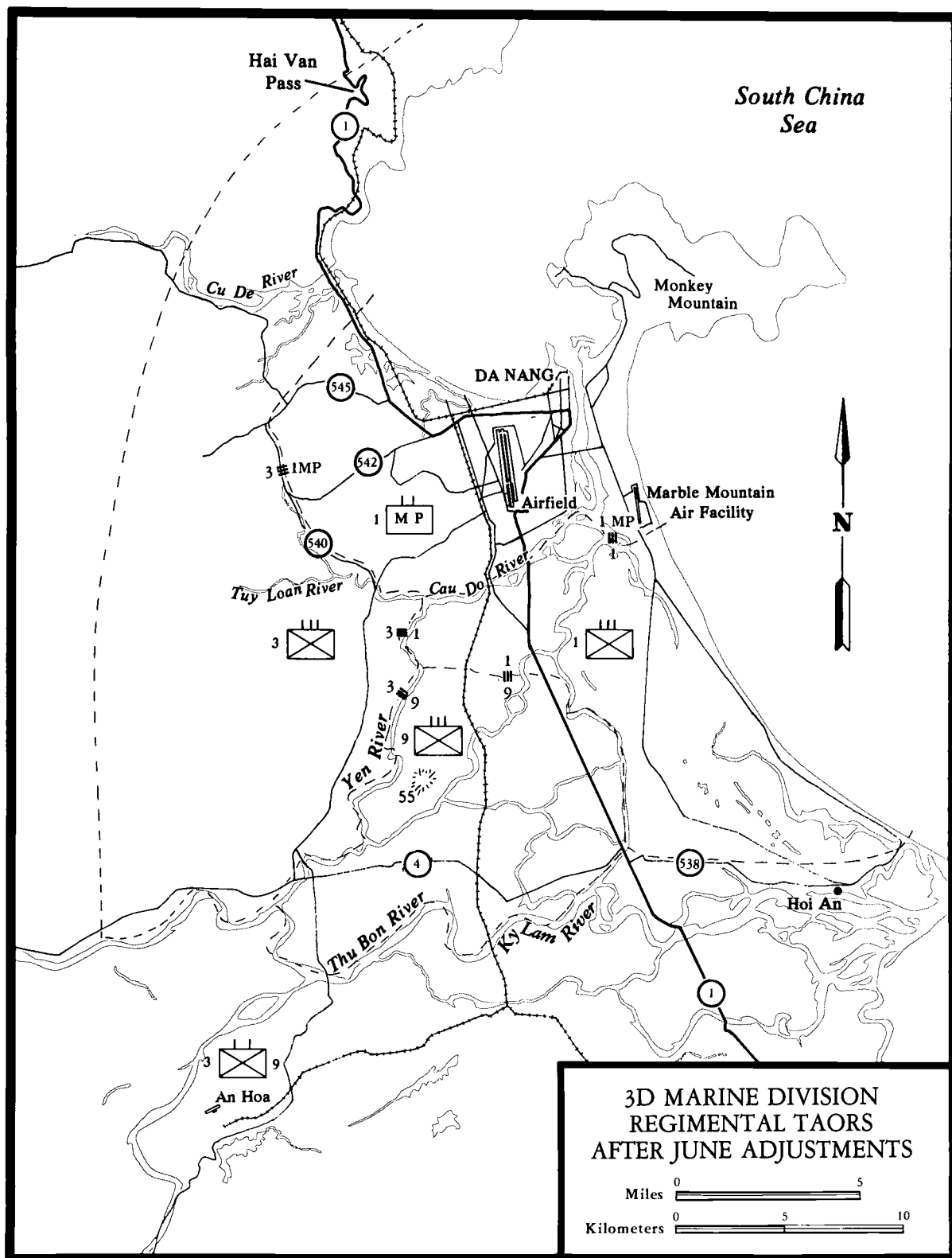
started. During the evening of 5 June, the battalion commander and his small mobile command group, embarked in three Ontos,\* found themselves stalled on the northern fringes of Phong Ho (2), a hamlet 10,000 meters south of the Marble Mountain Air Facility and in an area "noted for their hostility toward ARVN soldiers and their allies." Bell's vehicle had run out of gas and the group had just been resupplied by helicopter. As the aircraft took off for the return trip to Marble Mountain, VC weapons from positions approximately 1,000 meters to the southwest opened fire. Using his command group with its Ontos as a blocking unit, Lieutenant Colonel Bell ordered reinforcements from his Company B, supported by LVTs and tanks, brought up from the south of Phong Ho (2). According to the battalion commander, "the result was a sound thrashing of the VC" with 11 dead enemy left on the battlefield and a number of captured weapons. Bell remembered several years afterward, "This area was never pacified and later was leveled, and the villagers removed and relocated."<sup>23</sup>

On 7 June Operation Liberty began with heavy preparatory artillery fires. Marine artillery neutralized 35 objective areas in front of the advancing infantry.<sup>24</sup> Initially, the enemy countered the Marine offensive with only small arms fire and mines. The mines were the more deadly of the two. The most significant mine incident occurred on 11 June in the 9th Marines central sector. Captain Carl A. Reckewell's Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, walked into a large minefield in a grassy plot just south of the La Tho River. Two detonations killed three Marines and wounded 21. While the wounded were being evacuated, four to five additional explosions occurred and the grass caught fire, but fortunately there were no further Marine casualties. The following day, the artillery fired a destruction mission which caused seven secondary explosions in that same field.<sup>25</sup>

On 15 June, the division completed its planned realignment of regiments in the TAOR. Colonel Mitchell assumed operational control of his two 1st Marines battalions and took over responsibility for

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\*The Ontos was a full-tracked, lightly armored, mobile carrier, mounting six 106mm recoilless rifles, four .50 caliber spotting rifles, and one .30 caliber machine gun. It had a crew of three and was the primary weapon of the antitank battalion.



the division's eastern flank from the 9th Marines. With a corresponding reduction in the western sector, the 9th Marines' TAOR now consisted of only 134 square miles, the regiment having given away nearly 100 square miles in the exchange.

With the adjustment of forces and sectors, the 3d Marine Division continued its "scrubbing" actions in Operation Liberty. The only serious enemy opposition occurred in the 9th Marines zone of action. On 18 June, Company C, 9th Marines, operating 2,000 meters south of Dai Loc, came under heavy mortar and small arms fire, suffering eight wounded. The company asked for supporting air and artillery which ended the enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines underwent a similar attack on 22 June in the hamlet of La Hoa (1), immediately east of the railroad and 4,000 meters north of the Ky Lam. Marines once more called upon supporting arms, including naval gunfire from the destroyer USS *Marton* (DD 948), to silence

the enemy.\* By the end of the month, all three Marine regiments reached Phase Line Green and the operation ended. VC resistance to the Marine advance had been scattered and ineffective. The 9th Marines observed that the lack of major enemy resistance gave plausibility to the thesis that the momentum of Operation Liberty prevented them from gaining any degree of initiative and uprooted them "from what had been a relatively secure operating area."<sup>26</sup> That regiment alone claimed to have recovered 40 square miles from the VC. The Marines were once more optimistic about pacifying the extensive Da Nang enclave.

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\*According to U.S. Navy historians, "Between four and nine ships including destroyers, cruisers, and rocket ships were available for gunfire support in Vietnam at any one time and more than half the missions supported Marines in I Corps." NHD, Comments on draft MS, dtd 19Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



PART III  
SPRING FIGHTING IN  
SOUTHERN I CORPS



## CHAPTER 7

# “They’re Not Supermen,” Meeting the NVA in Operation Utah, March 1966

*First Contact with the NVA—Operation Utah Expands*

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### *First Contact With the NVA*

In contrast to the extended antiguerrilla small-unit war waged in the Da Nang TAOR, the Marines in southern I CTZ fought a series of sharp engagements during the late winter and early spring against North Vietnamese regulars. The first heavy fighting occurred during Operation Utah, early in March. Planning for Utah began when Colonel Bruce Jones, USA, senior advisor to the 2d ARVN Division, visited General Platt on 3 March, just after Platt returned to his CP at Chu Lai following Operation Double Eagle. Jones told Platt that the ARVN division had obtained intelligence that the *21st NVA Regiment* had recently moved into a region seven miles northwest of Quang Ngai City.

With the concurrence of both Generals McCutcheon and English, who were acting CG III MAF and CG 3d Marine Division, respectively, during General Walt’s visit to Washington, General Platt decided to mount a coordinated attack with the 2d ARVN Division. Platt ordered his senior regimental commander, Colonel Peatross, the commanding officer of the 7th Marines, to meet with the 2d Division commanding general, who was still General Lam. Colonel Peatross, who, like General Platt, had worked closely together with General Lam during previous operations, flew that evening together with Colonel William G. Johnson, the commanding officer of MAG-36, to the 2d Division Headquarters at Quang Ngai City. There, the American and South Vietnamese commanders agreed to launch a combined operation using one ARVN and one Marine battalion.

According to the concept of operations, the two battalions were to land near the hamlet of Chau Nhai (5), 15 kilometers northwest of Quang Ngai City. The ARVN battalion was to land first and secure the landing zone, followed by the Marine bat-

talion. Then both battalions were to advance southeastward paralleling Route 527 and then due east to Route 1, a distance of seven miles. The ARVN battalion was to operate north of Route 527, while the Marines were to deploy south of the road.

The planning period was very brief. Arriving back at Chu Lai late on the night of 3 March, Colonel Peatross and Colonel Johnson, who had been designated tactical air commander, met with Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, at the 7th Marines CP and told him about the forthcoming operation. By morning, the 2d Battalion had three companies staged at Chu Lai for helicopter movement. Captain Alex Lee, the battalion’s assistant operations officer, characterized the preparations as “nothing more than get on your horse and go.”<sup>1</sup>

The objective area consisted of paddy lands and the hamlets of the Chau Nhai village complex. Hills 97 and 85 overlooked the landing zone from the southwest. Doughnut-shaped Hill 50 was the dominant terrain feature to the northeast. The hamlet of Chau Nhai (5), the first objective of the ARVN battalion, southwest of that hill was to be the scene of extensive fighting during the next few days.

On the morning of 4 March, Marine A-4s from MAG-12, F-4s from MAG-11, reinforced by USAF Martin B-57 Canberra bombers, strafed and bombed the objective area to prepare for the helicopter landings. Despite this aerial bombardment, the MAG-36 helicopters carrying the first elements of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion were taken under 12.7mm antiaircraft fire as they began to land at 0900. Within 10 minutes, all four of the accompanying armed UH-1Es from VMO-6 were hit. Enemy gunners downed one of the Hueys, but its crew was evacuated. Marine jets overhead attacked while the tactical air commander increased the landing intervals between successive helicopter waves. Enemy ground fire shot down one F-4 from VMFA-531 while it was making a napalm run, but the crew was

rescued after ejecting and landing in the South China Sea.

Despite the intensity of the antiaircraft fire, the MAG-36 helicopters continued landing. Ten of the 20 UH-34s from HMM-261 and HMM-364 in the first lift were hit. Major Michael J. Needham, the HMM-364 strike leader, was forced to relinquish control of the landing when his aircraft was hit in the fuel line. Colonel Johnson later recalled: "the role of strike leader was then passed from aircraft division [usually four planes] to aircraft division as each division came in to land its troops." As the tactical air commander for the operation with access to 1st Wing support assets, the MAG commander was airborne in a command and control helicopter on his way from Chu Lai to the Quang Ngai Airfield at the time of the insertion of the ARVN airborne troopers. When hearing of the heavy resistance encountered in the landing zones, he "ordered by radio all MAG-36 helos to report to Quang Ngai for a briefing." This order caused an interruption of all planned missions and "consternation in air command and control agencies, but was effective." Sixteen UH-34s from the group's remaining transport squadron, HMM-363, soon joined the HMM-261 and HMM-364 aircraft to lift the remaining ARVN airborne troops from the Quang Ngai field to the landing zone.<sup>2</sup>

By 1030 that morning, the last elements of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion were in the zone. The Marine helicopter group had completed the lift of more than 400 men of the battalion under most adverse circumstances. Colonel Johnson expressed the opinion that:

The North Vietnamese did not think we would continue the lift in the face of that automatic weapons fire. We did continue the lift and we kept the automatic weapons under almost constant attack by fixed-wing aircraft while we were going in there. And this enabled us to get in.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the heavy opposition that the Marine pilots encountered, the South Vietnamese troops met little resistance on the ground as they attacked northeast toward Hill 50.

With the completion of the landing of the South Vietnamese battalion, the MAG-36 helicopters returned to Chu Lai to bring Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion into the objective area. By 1040, the first elements of the battalion were on their way. Once more enemy gunners challenged the landing. The first wave, the 1st Platoon of Company F, land-



Marine Corps Photo A186813  
*Marines from Company F, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines meet resistance after arriving in the landing zone during Operation Utah. Marine on the right is firing a M79 grenade launcher.*

ed under heavy fire. The platoon was isolated for 15 minutes until the helicopters could bring in the rest of the company. By 1130, both Companies F and G, and the battalion command group, were on the ground, meeting only light resistance as they secured the immediate area, but the intensity of the enemy antiaircraft fire delayed the arrival of Company H until after 1300.

During the two-and-one-half hour lift, Colonel Johnson's helicopters, reinforced by a squadron from MAG-16, moved more than 600 men of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines from Chu Lai into the Utah area of operations. In the course of landing the Marine battalion, several more UH-34s were hit and one crashed in the landing zone. One platoon from Company H remained in the LZ to provide security for the downed craft. Lieutenant Colonel Utter had to send a platoon from Company G 1,500 meters southwest of the landing zone to guard the UH-1E downed earlier, thus further reducing his effective strength. His Company E was already lost to him for the operation because it had been assigned to accompany Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines which had displaced to firing positions near Binh Son, 7,000 meters northeast of Utter's position.

While the 2d Battalion was arriving in the battle area, the Marine command began preparations to expand the operation. Colonel Peatross had accompanied Colonel Johnson to Quang Ngai. He was present when Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6, reported to Colonel Johnson after leading his gunships in the pre-H-hour preparation of the landing zones. According to Peatross, Zitnik stated something to the effect that "we have a tiger by the tail." Agreeing with the VMO commander that the heavy antiaircraft fire indicated the presence of a sizeable enemy force, Colonel Peatross left his operations and intelligence officers at the 2d ARVN Division command post and returned to Chu Lai to give General Platt a firsthand report and to alert additional Marine forces.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, approximately 1130, General Platt decided to reactive Task Force Delta. Colonel Peatross was assigned as Chief of Staff and personnel from the 7th Marines and 4th Marines Headquarters made up the rest of the staff. By late afternoon, a Marine truck convoy had moved most of the Task Force headquarters personnel and equipment to a command post near Quang Ngai, close to the 2d Division CP. According to General Platt, the two headquarters were "literally collocated. . . . I was very close to General Lam. Our 2s and 3s were only a few feet apart." Both CPs were about 2,000 meters northeast of Quang Ngai City on a 101-meter height named Nui Thien An, meaning "Mountain of Heavenly Peace," but called "Buddha Hill" by the Marines because of a nearby Buddhist temple. General McCutcheon, the acting III MAF commander, later compared the hill to "Little Round Top" at Gettysburg as it overlooked the southern sector of the developing battle seven miles to the northwest.<sup>5\*</sup>



Marine Corps Photo A332583 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross) *Col Oscar F. Peatross, Commanding Officer, 7th Marines visits the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines command post during Operation Utah. Col Peatross became the TF Delta Chief of Staff under BGen Jonas M. Platt.*

*A view of Utah area of operations as seen from Buddha Hill, the TF Delta command post. Because it overlooked the developing battle, MajGen McCutcheon compared Buddha Hill to "Little Round Top" at Gettysburg.*

Marine Corps Photo A332571 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross)



\*Captain Edwin W. Besch, who at the time was the Task Force Delta Headquarters commandant, recalled that both the TF Delta and 2d Division CP were virtually without any security the first night, while located "about 50 yards from a Regional/Popular Forces triangular-shaped fortified company outpost which had been *annihilated* by a Main Force unit" a month before. According to Besch, security was later provided by a variety of units, including a South Vietnamese airborne company, ". . . only 38 men strong, but looking extremely confident (cocky) and armed with a mixture of M-14 rifles, captured AK-47s . . . Thompson & M-3 submachine guns, etc. . . . a Marine rifle company in reserve, and an ARVN 105mm battery, and a small unit of . . . Nung mercenaries." Capt Edwin W. Besch, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Shortly after 1300, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion secured Hills 97 and 85 and began advancing south. Although the Marine companies encountered only very light resistance, the airborne battalion to the northeast ran into heavy opposition in the vicinity of Chau Nhai (5) and then Hill 50. About 1330, the ARVN commander asked for help from the Marine battalion. Utter received permission to stop his advance and ordered his companies to wheel about to reinforce the southern flank of the Vietnamese battalion. In Utter's words:

We went cross-country and found the airborne battalion engaged in an argument with the enemy over a small hill [Hill 50] that dominated the surrounding terrain. . . . I met a real soldier . . . when I sought out the American advisor Captain Pete Dawkins [Captain Peter Dawkins of West Point football fame] and I met his counterpart, the airborne battalion commander . . . we agreed to attack to the east. Airborne on the left, Marines on the right.<sup>6</sup>

The Marines were forced to make some late-minute adjustments to their original plan. Lieutenant Colonel Utter received a radio message from Dawkins that the ARVN airborne battalion commander planned "to work completely around Hill 50" before attacking. Utter then ordered Captain Jerry D. Lindauer, who had recently assumed command of Company F on the battalion's northern flank, to maneuver his company toward the ARVN right and then hold this line until Company G moved abreast. In effect, the Marine battalion was to make a pivoting movement and tie in with the ARVN flank.<sup>7</sup>

The ARVN battalion did not move, which initially did not alarm the Marines. Captain Lindauer, the Company F commander, several years later recalled that he spoke to Captain Dawkins, "to let him [Dawkins] know we were moving forward," and remembered: "It was a mutual understanding that the ARVN would remain in the vicinity of Hill 50" until the ARVN wounded were evacuated.<sup>8</sup>

The Marine battalion then advanced in a general easterly direction: Company F on the left, Company G in the center, and Company H in an echelon formation to protect the open southern flank. According to Lieutenant Colonel Utter:

We got off to a good start. It was fairly even ground, we had a nice even line with good contact, there was enough excitement to keep everyone on his toes, air was on station and artillery was within range and in position. I wasn't even too concerned about being minus one company and short a platoon from each of two others.<sup>9</sup>

The Marines had only pushed forward a few hundred meters in this fashion when they came under heavy fire from what Lieutenant Colonel Utter later estimated to have been two battalions of the *21st NVA Regiment*. The enemy fought from well prepared positions and took full advantage of the ground. They were too close to the Marines for Utter to call in artillery and air. He had very little choice but to continue the attack. Utter later explained, "we were in a frontal attack pure and simple, with everything committed from the outset."<sup>10</sup>

His Company G, under Captain William D. Seymour in the battalion center, penetrated the enemy positions in two places, but Utter did not have the reserves to exploit these minor gains. According to one of the battalion's staff officers, the Marines "employed fire and maneuver taking cover behind rice paddy dikes" but that the "NVA heavy machine gun fire . . . was delivered at so close a range it actually destroyed sections" of these dikes.<sup>11</sup>

Company H on the battalion right had made some progress, when the enemy counterattacked. An estimated NVA company maneuvered to the south and attacked the Marine company from that direction. Using his 81mm mortars to good effect, the company commander, a West Point graduate, 1st Lieutenant James Lau, directed the defense. Company H repulsed the enemy attack.

The growing gap on the Marine battalion's left flank between it and the ARVN battalion posed the greatest danger to the Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Utter requested Captain Dawkins, the U.S. Army advisor, to ask the Vietnamese battalion commander to attempt to close this gap between the two battalions but the Vietnamese commander "refused to do so."<sup>12</sup>

According to Utter:

This meant our left flank was wide open, with nothing to put there. But the PAVNs [Peoples Army of Vietnam] had plenty of people, so they poured through. . . . and back to the south the enemy was going at it again with "H" Company. And there we were, taking it from three sides, the front, and both flanks, and from an enemy who was literally hugging us so we wouldn't use our supporting arms.<sup>13</sup>

Captain Lindauer's Company F on the exposed left flank was most vulnerable to the enemy attack. Lindauer, who was 200 meters behind his lead platoons, the 1st and the 2d, when the enemy struck, moved forward ". . . to get a firmer grasp of the situation." He managed to reach the 2d Platoon, but

the 1st Platoon, further north, was cut off from the rest of the company, and the entire company was taking heavy casualties. Lindauer, who had been wounded himself, recalled that, "other than the fact that I was damned mad about the situation, I was lucid and able to make decisions."<sup>14\*</sup> He radioed the battalion executive officer, reported the situation, and remonstrated about delays in artillery and medical evacuation helicopters. Lindauer later apologized, explaining that he "was somewhat distraught with all the dead and wounded" around him and that he "expected miracles in that field," but now realized that the battalion was doing all that was possible, under the circumstances. In fact, shortly after speaking to the executive officer, as Lindauer recalled:

Air came up on Bn Tac [battalion tactical net] and asked me to mark the target. I had a yellow smoke thrown and told him to take a 90 degree azimuth 100-200 meters from it and keep hitting it. Simultaneously Arty said they were ready to fire, so I told air to stand by until completion of the fire mission, and if Arty was on, to hit the same area. You can tell Jim Black [Captain James O. Black, Commander, Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines] he was right on the money, and then the air started a continual attack which took a lot of pressure off us. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Learning that Lindauer had a badly shattered arm, Lieutenant Colonel Utter sent his assistant operations officer, Captain Lee, to take over the command of Company F. Lee made his way through heavy fire and finally reached the company's CP about 1700 and relieved Lindauer. The new company com-



Marine Corps Photo A186812  
*Marines from 2d Battalion, 7th Marines take cover and return fire as they come under attack during Operation Utah. The Marines engaged two battalions of the 21st NVA Regiment.*

mander reported to Utter that Company F's situation was still serious and that they were running out of ammunition. At this point the battalion received reinforcements; the platoon from Company H, left behind in the landing zone to protect the damaged helicopter, arrived at the battalion command group's position, the helicopter having been repaired and flown back to Chu Lai. According to Utter, ". . . the decision was made for me—they [the Company H platoon] had to go to that open left flank." This assistance enabled Lee to solidify his positions and close the gap between his 1st and 2d Platoons.<sup>16</sup>

By this time, all of Utter's companies were reporting shortages of ammunition. The battalion S-4, Captain Martin E. O'Connor, had organized a group of 81mm mortarmen to distribute ammunition to the frontline elements.\*\* Although the group ac-

\*Captain Lindauer, a retired lieutenant colonel in 1978, bitterly recalled the refusal of the ARVN battalion to reinforce the Marines: ". . . I received no support from the ARVN and my supporting arms requests to the left flank were denied as too close to the ARVN. During that entire day, I am not aware that the ARVN Airborne Battalion did anything except view our critical situation as detached observers from the vantage point of Hill 50, and even allowed the NVA to come in behind us." Lindauer stated that Captain Dawkins "endeavored to get . . . [the battalion commander] to move but to no avail." LtCol Jerry D. Lindauer, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). Lieutenant Colonel Utter in his after action report was more charitable to the ARVN commander. He declared that he was not aware of the ARVN situation nor of the "ability of the ARVN commander to respond to this request." Utter suggested that, "The answer could have been a single commander on the spot to coordinate and direct both forces, based on the engagement of each." 2/7 AAR, Opn Utah, dtd 12Mar66. In any event it is not clear that the ARVN ever secured Hill 50. If they did, they soon abandoned it.

\*\*Captain O'Connor recalled in his comments that the ammunition which was distributed had been brought in by two helicopters, which "landed under fire and jettisoned their badly needed cargo." LtCol Martin E. O'Connor, Comments on draft MS, dtd 24May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

completed this mission and also evacuated the seriously wounded to a more secure area, the battalion's position remained precarious. Lieutenant Colonel Utter decided to order his companies to fall back. He later explained:

... darkness coming ... up against superior numbers ... no reserve; the enemy increasing his fire and his movement around us; wounded and dead on our hands; and fast running out of ammunition. I had nothing to lose but my pride in ordering a withdrawal—so I ordered one.<sup>17</sup>

The Marine battalion disengaged under heavy pressure. According to Utter, "We made the first 50 to 100 yards—painfully. Then we rolled in the air. Under cover of bombs, rockets, napalm, and strafing runs we made 200 more rather easily." As Company H began to pull back, it came under 60mm mortar fire and enemy infantry advanced toward the Marines. The company repulsed the North Vietnamese attack and continued its withdrawal to Chau Nhai (4), where the battalion was establishing night defensive positions. The last elements of the battalion reached the new perimeter two hours after dark.<sup>18</sup>

General Platt had already begun to take measures to reinforce the 2d Battalion. His main concern at that stage was that the North Vietnamese might

*A Marine jet streaks in to provide close air support during Operation Utah. Marine infantry can be seen advancing in the foreground.*

Marine Corps Photo A186942



evade the allied force as they had done during Double Eagle. He had ordered the deployment of another 155mm battery to Binh Son and Lieutenant Colonel James R. Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines to establish blocking defenses north of Utter's battalion. Shortly after 1800, Young's battalion was in position on the high ground south of the Tra Bong River, 5,000 meters west-southwest of Binh Son. Because of the heavy resistance encountered by Utter's battalion, General Platt alerted yet another battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines still at Chu Lai, for helicopter movement the following morning to a landing zone 2,500 meters south of Utter's night perimeter.<sup>19</sup>

During the night of 4-5 March, the enemy continued to harass Utter's battalion in Chau Nhai (4). The North Vietnamese became especially active when helicopters arrived. Because of the intensity of the enemy fire, Lieutenant Colonel Utter had called off helicopter missions during the day, but about 2130, MAG-36 once more renewed flights. During the next seven hours the helicopter pilots brought in much needed supplies and evacuated 70 casualties, despite some NVA fire.\* Lieutenant Colonel Utter remarked:

As we tried resupply and evacuation, we received .50 caliber and mortars on each bird. But this disclosed a trenchline to our right rear and "H" Company took it in a night assault—killing twenty. After that the birds worked all night—while my Marines gleefully used their fresh ammunition on the enemy. ...<sup>20</sup>

During that night Marine supporting arms also played a large role. An Air Force AC-47 arrived on station and dropped flares. Marine jets continued to strike at suspected enemy positions with bombs, rockets, and napalm, while A-4s from MAG-12 made high altitude, radar-controlled bombing strikes on enemy trail networks leading into the bat-

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\*General Peatross commented on the difficulty of resupplying the committed units during the night of 4 March. Although observing that no unit actually ran out of ammunition, "we had to be selective as to which units to resupply. ... as it generally happens, the units that needed it most were the most difficult to get to. Nevertheless, in total darkness, helicopters flew into the area ... and hovered as low as was practical—50 to a 100 feet above—and dropped the ammunition and other items of supply." MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



tle area. Colonel Leslie E. Brown, the MAG-12 commander, recalled:

We were just in a long stream of bombing and coming back and rearming and going back as fast as we could . . . you were not necessarily flying with the same squadron that you left with. You came back and joined up and the next two to four airplanes off became a flight . . . the level of proficiency was so high that it didn't matter who was leading.<sup>21</sup>

Artillery kept pace with the air effort during the night and early morning hours of 4-5 March. Both 155mm howitzer batteries at Binh Son, Batteries K and M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, fired in support of the Marines and the ARVN airborne battalion further north. The Marine artillerymen expended so many rounds that two ammunition resupply truck convoys from Chu Lai were required to replenish the stock.\*

Just as the second convoy arrived at Binh Son shortly after 0500, the North Vietnamese launched a major attack against the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion's defensive position near Hill 50. Major Elmer N. Snyder, at that time Task Force Delta operations officer, asked the artillery liaison officer to call for ". . . maximum fires on the four grid squares that comprised the battlefield. . . ." In the largest single fire mission yet conducted in the Chu Lai area, the two Binh Son batteries, reinforced by a 155mm gun battery at Chu Lai, fired 1,900 rounds in two hours.<sup>22</sup>

At 0730 on the 5th, General Platt ordered Lieutenant Colonel Young to advance south from his blocking positions south of the Tra Bong River to secure the northern flank of the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion. Young's 3d Battalion, with Company L on the right, Company M on the left, and the command group and Company I following, met only

slight resistance during the first two hours as it pushed forward to relieve enemy pressure on the South Vietnamese troopers.

### *Operation Utah Expands*

While the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines moved to link up with the ARVN airborne troopers, Generals Lam and Platt brought additional forces into the battle. Having found that the *21st NVA Regiment* was more than willing to stand and fight, both commanders wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to surround and destroy the enemy unit. During the early morning, General Lam ordered the 37th Ranger Battalion, supported by his Strike Company\*\* and an APC troop, to move from Quang Ngai to form blocking positions, 1,500 meters west of the railroad track and 3,000 meters east of Chau Nhay (4). The South Vietnamese Airborne Task Force Alfa command group and the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion was to be airlifted from Saigon to Quang Ngai. On its arrival, General Lam planned to land the 5th ARVN Airborne in the same landing zone where the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines had landed the previous day. From there, the newly inserted ARVN unit was to attack northeast, joining the 1st ARVN Airborne. Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines was to secure the landing zone for the Vietnamese unit, clear its battlefield of the previous day, and serve as the Task Force Delta reserve battalion. General Platt also had alerted Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines command group for movement to Binh Son and had inserted "P. X." Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into the southern Utah area to close out any avenue of escape for the enemy regiment.<sup>23</sup>

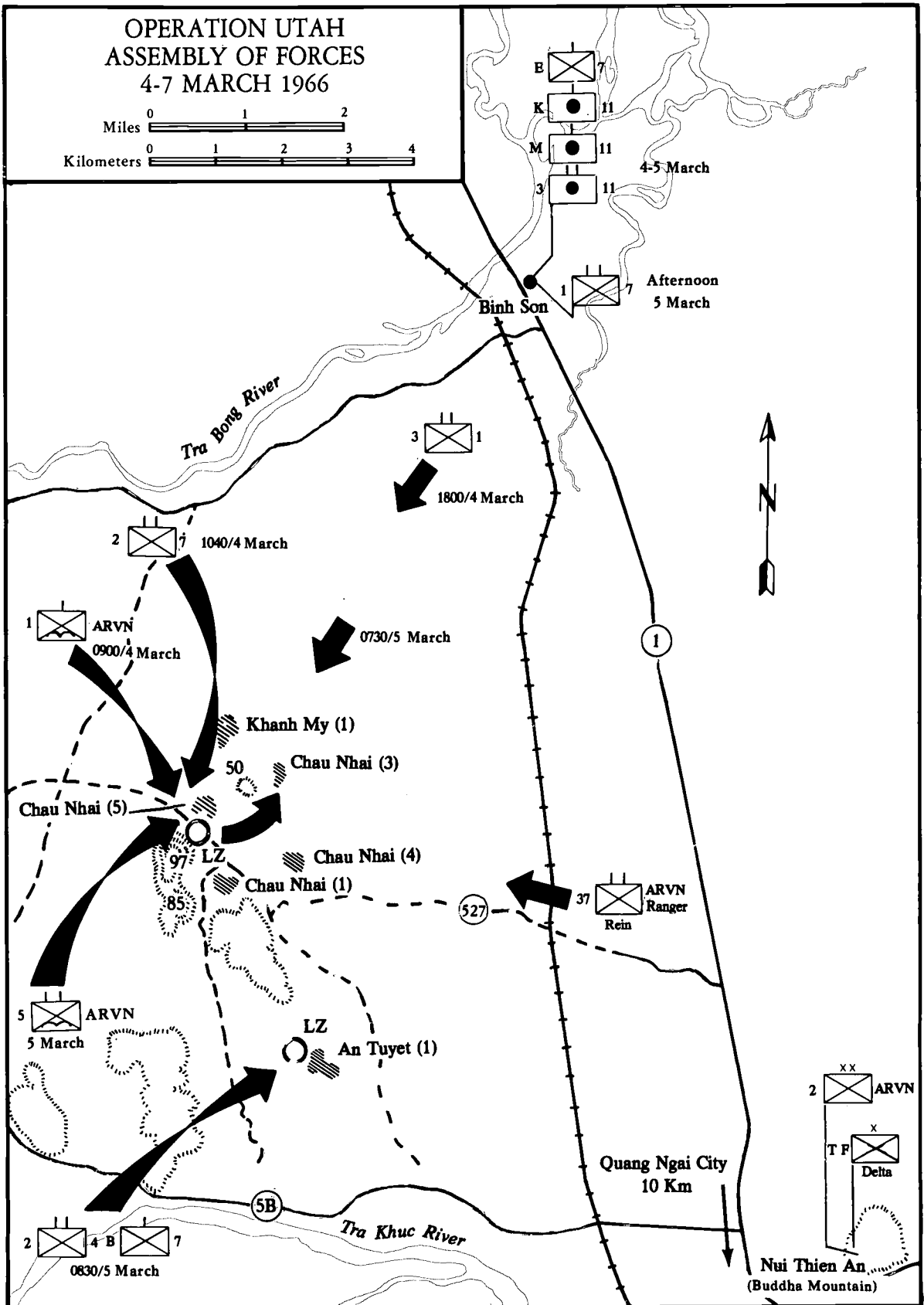
The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines began landing shortly after 0830 on a small hill near An Tuyet (1), 3,000 meters north of the Tra Khuc River. Despite air preparation of the landing zone, Communist gunners contested the helicopter landing of the Marine battalion. Heavy machine gun fire put several MAG-36 helicopters out of commission and

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\*According to Colonel Paul B. Watson, Jr., who commanded the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines in March 1966, "the convoys consisted of supply trucks, a 105mm howitzer battery, and the command group from 3d Battalion, 11th Marines. . . . they departed Chu Lai at 0200. Upon arrival at the Binh Son artillery positions, the ammunition trucks were backed up to the gun positions and unloaded one round at a time directly into the weapons chambers." Both Colonel Watson and General Peatross suggested that this was "the first Marine convoy to have ventured out of either the Da Nang or Chu Lai enclaves at night." Col Paul B. Watson, Jr., Comments on draft MS, n.d. [June 78] (Vietnam Comment File). See also MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*\*The Strike Company of the 2d ARVN Division was an elite infantry unit directly under the operational control of the division commander.



caused repeated transfers of leadership during the lift. Lieutenant Colonel Mervin B. Porter, Commanding Officer, HMM-261, the first flight leader, was hit several times on his third trip into the landing zone and was forced to retire. Major David A. Spurlock then became flight leader, but the enemy gunfire forced his aircraft down in the landing zone. Captain James P. Kenny from HMM-261 took over as leader, and with eight other pilots completed the battalion lift, but not before another UH-34 crashed in the LZ. Major Snyder, the Task Force Delta operations officer, wrote:

American advisors to the 2d ARVN Div had warned me when planning 2/4's lift into the LZ selected that a VC Battalion (Provincial Force) had long operated in that area and that we might receive substantial trouble. What with the tempo of operations, it was determined that this was a necessary calculated risk.<sup>24</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion met stiff resistance on the west and in the villages northwest and southwest of the landing zone. Two of Kelley's companies were engaged at close quarters until 1100. At that time, General Platt ordered the battalion commander to continue the original mission of closing the southern flank of the objective area. Kelley disengaged the two companies, G and H, from the firefight and began a sweep to the north. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, attached to Kelley's command for the operation, remained in the landing zone to provide security for the downed helicopters. The battalion's forward companies and command group reached Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion without incident and established night defensive positions.<sup>25</sup>

While these events were going on in the southern Utah area, Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion in the north encountered major enemy opposition shortly after 1030 while trying to link up with the 1st ARVN Airborne Battalion. Company M on the 3d Battalion's eastern flank came under heavy fire just north of Chau Nhay (3). Company L skirted the Company M fight and one of its platoons was ordered to "join the ARVN" on Hill 50. As the 3d Platoon moved to carry out these orders, it soon became clear that the NVA not the ARVN held Hill 50. The enemy confronting both companies had the advantages of prepared positions and terrain; they held the high ground. Bamboo fences and hedgerows masked the enemy position from the Marines. Having constructed an extensive tunnel



Marine Corps Photo A186762  
*BGen Jonas M. Platt, Commanding General, Task Force Delta, visits site of captured NVA command post on Hill 50 during Utah. Capt Charles W. Lattin, the commanding officer of Company M, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, gestures as he describes the action to Gen Platt.*

network which connected bunkers and spider traps, the enemy lay in wait in elaborate entrenchments protected by minefields and booby traps.

Despite these formidable defenses, the Marine battalion pressed the attack. Eventually reinforced by the 1st ARVN Airborne, Company L succeeded in taking Hill 50 after a three-and-a-half-hour engagement. Near Chau Nhay (3), Company M, however, made little headway against an estimated NVA battalion. With Company M stopped, Lieutenant Colonel Young sent his reserve company, Company I, into the action; it passed around Company M's positions and tried to push into Chau Nhay (3) from the east. At the same time, the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion advanced toward Young's battalion in a pincer movement from the southwest. Plans called for them to relieve Company L on Hill 50. As darkness fell, both Companies L and M withdrew well to the north, while Company I consolidated its position on the eastern edge of Chau Nhay (3). Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion's casualties were 32 killed and 90 wounded during the day's fighting.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, Generals Lam and Platt believed they had the enemy regiment surrounded and could tighten the ring the next morning. In addition to the two ARVN airborne battalions and the 3d Battalion,

1st Marines closing in on the Hill 50 area, the two generals had moved other units into blocking positions to the east and south. The 2d Battalions of the 7th and 4th Marines were to the south and the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines was to the northeast. A 2d Division task force, consisting of the 37th Ranger Battalion and 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, was along the railroad due east of the battle area. General Platt had already reinforced the artillery at Binh Son with the command group of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines and a 105mm howitzer battery.

Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, far from the previous fighting, was still providing security for one of the downed helicopters near An Tuyet (1). Paradoxically, the heaviest action of the night and early morning hours of 5-6 March occurred at this relatively isolated position. At 2300, Captain Robert C. Prewitt, the company commander, reported to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines that he was under mortar and heavy small arms attack.\* According to Lieutenant Colonel Kelley, "Prewitt advised me that he was dangerously low on ammunition." The battalion commander informed General Platt of the situation and asked for an emergency resupply for the company. The task force commander approved the mission and two HMM-364 helicopters took off from Quang Ngai to deliver the needed ammunition.<sup>27</sup>

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\*General Peatross commented on the rationale for leaving Prewitt's company behind to guard the downed helicopters. He declared that the question "To leave or not to leave a helicopter had been a subject as old as the first helicopter in the testing stage, in the Marine Corps Schools, in writing of the manual *Helicopterborne Operations*, in training exercises . . . and other operations." Peatross recalled that General McCutcheon during a visit to the Task Force Delta CP suggested destroying the aircraft, but that "I felt otherwise. We discussed that matter in . . . detail and concluded that we should not leave one unless the helicopter was already destroyed beyond repair." According to Peatross, there were two major reasons for this decision: The first was to keep up the morale of the helicopter crews who knew they and their craft would be protected and "the other point was that a downed helicopter almost invariably drew enemy action near it or to it everytime one went down. . . . as we were constantly searching for the enemy in our daily activities in Vietnam, why leave the helicopter when we knew that the enemy was going to come to it." Peatross remembered General McCutcheon calmly stating that if it "did not interfere with pursuit of the bigger enemy force, to do what we saw fit about the downed helicopter. This we did." MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

As the aircraft approached the landing zone, they both came under heavy fire and were unable to land. According to Major Snyder, who was in radio contact with Company B, the lead pilot, First Lieutenant Terril J. Richardson, radioed Prewitt:

. . . and regretfully announced that they would not be able to land. After Prewitt informed him of the severity of the need (less than 100 rds of rifle ammo left in the company) the pilot [Richardson] said in effect that they would get the ammo in somehow. The result was that the two helos came across the zone a few feet off the ground and at about 10-20 mph while the crewmen kicked the ammo boxes out the doors. Both aircraft were hit by ground fire, but managed to flounder back to Quang Ngai.<sup>28</sup>

On the ground, Prewitt's company came under increasing pressure. Supported by mortars and automatic weapons, two North Vietnamese companies closed in on the Marine perimeter. About 0130, the enemy attacked the Marine positions from three directions—north, south, and west. With the help of Marine artillery at Binh Son and an ARVN 105mm battery at Quang Ngai, the newly replenished Marines repulsed the NVA attack. Even after the attack failed, the North Vietnamese continued to subject the Marine company to heavy mortar, small arms, and automatic weapons fire until early morning.

At 0745 6 March, General Platt ordered the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines to return to the landing zone and relieve Company B. The battalion left the blocking positions that it had established the night before, leaving the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines in place. By midafternoon, Kelley's battalion had moved overland and seized the high ground west of the landing zone. There was only light enemy resistance to the move; the main enemy force had withdrawn, but not without heavy losses. Captain Prewitt confirmed 38 enemy dead and estimated that at least twice that figure had been carried away. Major Snyder observed that "Bravo Company was too busy fighting for its life to worry about sophisticated estimates."<sup>29</sup>

The heavy fighting anticipated in the northern Utah area never developed. The night of the 5th was relatively quiet. On the morning of 6 March, Company I pulled back to join Companies L and M, and the two ARVN airborne battalions pulled back from forward positions to allow for the employment of supporting arms. After an intensive two-and-one-half-hour air and artillery bombardment, which

lasted until 1240, the three battalions advanced. The North Vietnamese were no longer there.

The North Vietnamese regiment had sustained heavy losses during the three-day fight. Lieutenant Colonel Young's Marines found 100 enemy bodies when the 3d Battalion reoccupied Hill 50 on 6 March. Later that afternoon, the battalion found an enormous cave complex, which apparently had served as the NVA regimental command post. The extensive tunnel network, still largely undamaged despite the allied bombardment, contained weapons, supplies, and documents. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Utter's battalion had discovered a similar defensive complex in its sector, consisting of "caves, trenches, foxholes, wire barricades, and deep, deep shelters." Utter remarked that some of the shafts went straight down for 15-to-20 feet and then swerved off in two to four directions. The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines found 43 enemy bodies in one of these tunnels. During Utah, allied forces claimed to have killed nearly 600 North Vietnamese soldiers and captured five prisoners and 49 weapons, including three 12.7mm machine guns and two mortars. Marine casualties were 98 dead and 278 wounded, while ARVN forces lost 30 killed and 120 wounded.<sup>30</sup>

Operation Utah ended on 7 March after Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion, assisted by



Marine Corps Photo A332584 (MajGen Oscar F. Peatross) *BGen Hoang Xuan Lam (wearing beret), Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division, inspects one of the captured enemy 12.7mm machine guns that had been used so effectively against the Marines and ARVN in Operation Utah. Gen Platt, the Task Force Delta commander, is on the right of the picture.*

Marine engineers, destroyed the enemy's defensive complex. Lieutenant Colonel Utter characterized the NVA enemy by saying, "they're not supermen. But they can fight. And they will fight when cornered or when they think they have you cornered."<sup>31</sup>

## CHAPTER 8

# Further Fighting and an Expanding Base of Operations, Chu Lai, March-June 1966

*A Bloody March—Expansion at Chu Lai—Operation Kansas*

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### *A Bloody March*

A few weeks after Operation Utah ended, the Marines engaged another Communist regiment in the Binh Son/Son Tinh region. Unknown to the allies, the *1st VC Regiment* had moved south from the Que Son area north of Chu Lai into northern Quang Ngai Province. On the night of 18-19 March, the enemy regiment overran a remote outpost on Hill 141 about 2,000 meters south of the Tra Bong River and 12,000 meters west-southwest of Binh Son District town. The position was known as the An Hoa outpost taking its name from a nearby village.\*

When radio contact was lost with the outpost, manned by the 936th Regional Force (RF) Company, and after learning that a 15-man patrol returning to the camp had come under heavy small arms fire from inside the camp, General Lam, on 19 March, decided to send a 2d ARVN Division reaction force to An Hoa. A 10-helicopter detachment from HMM-261, led by Major Robert P. Guay, picked up 120 ARVN soldiers at Quang Ngai and flew toward the outpost. As the helicopters approached the landing zone, enemy heavy machine guns opened fire, hitting eight of the 10 aircraft. Only three of the UH-34s were able to land, discharge their passengers, and take off. At this point, General Lam and the wing decided to "abort" the mission. Two Phantom jets from VMFA-542 bombed and strafed the former RF outpost so that the Marine helicopters could take out the 30 ARVN troops stranded in the nearby landing zone. HMM-261 completed the evacuation shortly after 1630.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with the fact that, An Hoa position was now in enemy hands, General Lam asked III MAF for

assistance in retaking the outpost. General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division's commanding general, ordered Colonel Peatross, the 7th Marines commander and senior officer at Chu Lai since General Platt's departure to become the III MAF Chief of Staff, to establish liaison with the 2d ARVN Division. On the afternoon of the 19th, Lam and Peatross had agreed to a concept of operations similar to that used for the Utah operation. Marine helicopters were to land a Marine and an ARVN airborne battalion about 4,000 meters west of An Hoa. Both battalions then were to close in on the former RF camp on top of Hill 141. Marine artillery was to support the operation and other infantry units were to be committed as required. The two commanders alerted their respective assault forces, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion, for the combined operation, codenamed Texas.<sup>2</sup>

By early morning on 20 March, Colonel Peatross and Colonel Johnson had established the forward command posts of the 7th Marines and MAG-36 at Binh Son.\*\* Colonel Johnson was once more the tactical air commander for the operation. The 2d ARVN Division also collocated its forward headquarters with the Marines. A battalion artillery group formed around the headquarters of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, and consisting of a 105mm howitzer battery and a 155mm howitzer battery, moved into firing positions 5,500 meters southwest of Binh Son. After fixed-wing strikes in the objective area, the 155mm howitzer battery, Captain James O. Black's Battery M, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines, started firing the landing zone preparation mission at 0730.

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\*\*Colonel Zitnik, the commanding officer of VMO-6 in March 1966, recalled that he dropped off Colonel Peatross and a few of his officers at Binh Son sometime around 2200 on the night of 19 March. Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 6Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*This An Hoa should not be confused with the An Hoa basin southwest of Da Nang.

Following the air and artillery bombardment, MAG-36 helicopters landed Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the ARVN 5th Airborne Battalion. The two units moved east with the ARVN battalion on the left flank and the Marines on the right. Neither unit met any serious opposition. The 3d Battalion's Company I was helilifted to the top of Hill 141 where the Marines found the bodies of 31 of the outpost defenders; the other 85 were missing. The enemy had departed.

That afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel "P. X." Kelley, whose 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had been designated the backup force for Operation Texas, decided to visit Binh Son to check the course of the battle. After an unscheduled stopover at the positions of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, he arrived at the 7th Marines command post. Discussing the situation with the regimental staff, he learned that the allies believed that the enemy force, suspected to be the *NVA 21st Regiment*, had escaped to the west and that his battalion "would most likely not be committed."<sup>3</sup>

According to Kelley:

I then talked with Colonel Bruce Jones, the senior advisor to the 2d ARVN Division and suggested that the VC might have moved towards the Vinh Tuy Valley, an area which had considerable activity in the past. My original suggestion at the time was to have 2/4 land there. After considerable discussion, I mentioned the fact that possibly the VC may have done the reverse of the obvious—that they may have moved in an easterly direction from Hill 141, towards the coastal plain. I then suggested the possibility of 3/7 changing its axis of advance to the Vinh Tuy Valley, and once it had passed through the valley it could join with 2/4 for a two-battalion sweep eastward to National Route 1.<sup>4</sup>

Colonel Jones and Kelley decided to present this concept to Colonel Peatross. Kelley later recalled that Colonel Peatross agreed in principle, but wanted to discuss the new plan with General Lam. The three officers then boarded a helicopter, piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik, commander of VMO-6, and Colonel Johnson, and flew to Quang Ngai City where they "... received General Lam's blessing." On the return flight to Binh Son, their course took them over Phuong Dinh (2) hamlet, 4,500 meters southeast of the An Hoa outpost. Colonel Peatross and Lieutenant Colonel Kelley, with the concurrence of Colonel Johnson, selected a large open field 1,000 meters west of the hamlet as the

landing zone for the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines on the following day.<sup>5</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik several years later observed that this close coordination between the senior air and ground officers permitted the air commander with a nod of his head to indicate to the ground commander that "their plans were supportable and they could proceed."<sup>6</sup>

The allies planned for the ARVN and Bodley's battalion to attack southeast from An Hoa on 21 March, while Kelley's battalion landed near Phuong Dinh (2) further to the south. General Lam reinforced the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion with the 4th ARVN Regimental Headquarters; the 2d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment; and an APC company. This ARVN task force was to advance until it reached Route 527 and then follow the road until it linked up with another ARVN battalion, the 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, in blocking positions west of Route 1. Operating west and southwest of the ARVN forces, Lieutenant Colonel Bodley's battalion was to march through the Vinh Tuy Valley and tie in with Kelley's battalion at Phuong Dinh (2). In the event of sizeable contact, Colonel Peatross would then commit his reserve, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines.<sup>7</sup>

On the 21st, both Kelley's and Bodley's battalions encountered large enemy forces in strongly fortified positions. For Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, the battle began as UH-34s from MAG-36 carrying the battalion's lead elements approached the landing area. The enemy reacted with small arms and machine gun fire. Company F, which landed first, repulsed attacks from north, east, and south of the landing zone. While the company maneuvered to secure the area, MAG-12 A-4s struck Phuong Dinh (2). Armed UH-1Es from VMO-6 flew suppressive fire missions while controlling the MAG-12 jets.

By 1115, the battalion command group, Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, attached to the 2d Battalion for the operation, and Company E had joined Company F on the ground. At this time, Kelley called for artillery bombardment of Phuong Dinh (2) from where most of the enemy resistance was coming. Once the artillery fire ended at 1230, the 2d Battalion began its assault on Phuong Dinh (2). Company D maneuvered toward the slightly higher ground north of the hamlet, while Companies E and F, with Company E in the lead, attacked due east. Aerial observers overhead detected no movement in Phuong Dinh (2). Five minutes after





the attack started, one of the pilots from VMO-6 radioed Lieutenant Colonel Kelley exclaiming, "My God, I can't believe it! They're erupting from the ground! There are hundreds of them."<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, the advance elements of Company E were hit by massed enemy infantry weapons fire. While the rest of the Marine company established a heavy base of covering fire, one platoon fought its way through the hamlet's outer defenses, only to discover three more interior defensive perimeters, including mutually supporting bunkers and three bands of tactical wire entanglements. Commenting on the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley later wrote:

Since ammunition was running low, I ordered Company E to withdraw to a covered position near the line of departure so that more artillery and air could be delivered on the target. At the same time, I ordered Company D to . . . establish a base of fire to relieve the pressure on Company E.<sup>9</sup>

Company D also ran into heavy enemy resistance and was unable to advance, but the company was able to place enough fire upon the enemy to afford some relief for Company E. At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley and his command group were on a small rise about 50 meters west of the hamlet, caught in a cross fire. Fourteen Marines in this group were killed or wounded. The situation for the 2d Battalion was so critical that Kelley called in air strikes which dropped napalm unusually close to his frontlines.<sup>10</sup>

Marine air and artillery engaged in an all-out effort to support the stalled infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. Watson, Jr., the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, added two new batteries, one 105mm howitzer and one 155mm howitzer, to the battalion artillery group supporting the operation. The original two batteries fired 1,346 rounds in support of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines during one continuous firing mission lasting from 1330 to 1500. Marine jets at the request of Colonel Johnson supplemented the artillery effort. By 1600, A-4s and F-4s had flown 51 strikes against the enemy. The 1st MAW Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) reported that it had diverted all Marine jets to the Texas operation. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik remembered that the requests caused some disruption "at the TACC, but all were provided and utilized."<sup>11</sup>

With this support and the arrival of additional



Marine Corps Photo A186286

*A Marine helicopter crew member mans a machine gun during Operation Texas. The helicopters bringing in the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines came under fire as they approached the landing zone.*

supplies by 1800, the 2d Battalion was able to consolidate its positions west of Phuong Dinh (2). Kelley later recalled:

I seriously considered a night attack, but with the average company strength down to 80-90, and pitted against a numerically superior enemy in well dug-in positions, with no reserve battalion to back up, I opted to continue the attack by fire.<sup>12</sup>

About 2,000 meters to the north of Phuong Dinh (2), the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines had encountered another fortified hamlet. As the battalion moved through the Vinh Tuy Valley the morning and early afternoon of 21 March, it passed through several nearly abandoned villages which displayed telltale signs of Viet Cong control. Only a few old men, women, and children appeared in fields abounding



Marine Corps Photo A186822

*Marines prepare to evacuate killed and wounded from battle area in Operation Texas. The troops are collecting extra ammunition and equipment from the casualties.*

in unharvested rice and other grains, while Marines found abandoned enemy defenses such as spider traps and tunnels. About 1515, near Thach An Noi (1), enemy machine guns and AK-47s began firing. As at Phuong Dinh (2), the enemy troops fought from well-prepared positions and showed a high degree of battle discipline. An overcrowded radio net caused delay in obtaining supporting air and artillery, but after three hours of close fighting in the hamlet, the Communist force, an estimated two companies, broke contact.<sup>13</sup>

With two of his battalions heavily engaged on the afternoon of 21 March, Colonel Peatross decided to commit his reserve. He selected the hamlet of Xuan Hoa as the target, 1,500 meters southeast of Phuong Dinh (2). The helilift of Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, reinforced with the 2d ARVN Division Strike Company, began at 1600. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik remembered that his Hueys from VMO-6 had controlled fixed-wing air strikes all afternoon and he had "thought we had neutralized . . ." the area. The transport helicopters carrying Young's battalion flew "low over open fields" toward the objective hamlet, situated at the

foot of a low-lying hill. Zitnik recalled seeing some uniformed VC heading toward Xuan Hoa and calling down strikes on the hamlet. According to the VMO-6 commander:

The hamlet was almost totally destroyed when the helos appeared, but . . . a few large mm tracers were fired at the flight and hit their mark. The A-4D pilots quickly took the position under attack and quieted the fire, but not until after one helo was hit.<sup>14</sup>

The helicopter from HMM-163 "rolled, inverted, and crashed," exploding and burning on impact. Seven 3d Battalion Marines and three crew members died in the wreckage. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Noah M. Kraft, was thrown clear, but later died of injuries.<sup>15</sup>

On the ground, the Marine infantry battalion and ARVN company encountered only sporadic resistance until reaching the outskirts of Xuan Hoa. Once more, the Marines and ARVN met well-entrenched VC who had organized their defenses within a tree line and bamboo fence which surrounded the hamlet. By nightfall, after two hours of close-quarter combat, Young's battalion had advanced 150 meters into Xuan Hoa. At this time, the

estimated enemy company disengaged and retreated, pursued by Marine artillery and Huey gunships.<sup>16</sup>

In the northern Texas area on 21 March, the ARVN 4th Regimental Task Force reached Route 527 and advanced east toward Route 1, without incident, at first. The 1st Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment was on the regimental left flank while the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion was on the right. Outside Khanh My (3), 2,000 meters west of the Chau Nhai complex where Operation Utah had taken place, the 5th Airborne Battalion and its supporting APC company ran into an enemy battalion. Twice, the ARVN airborne troops attacked the hamlet, supported by artillery and air, and twice, the Communists drove them back. Nine of the 12 tracked vehicles supporting the ARVN airborne were hit by mortars and grenades. Fighting continued into the night.<sup>17</sup>

By this time, General Lam had moved to his forward headquarters at Binh Son and very early on 22 March, Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, assumed command of the Marine forces in Operation Texas as Commanding General, Task Force Delta. This reactivation of Task Force Delta was in line with General Walt's policy of having Marine generals in command of major operations in the field with their Vietnamese counterparts. According to Colonel Peatross, the reactivation of Task Force Delta was a change of designation not the establishment of a new headquarters. The 7th Marines staff became the Task Force Delta staff; the only thing that changed was the name. He later wrote:

General English did fly into the CP and remain until the operation was over. . . . There was no question in my mind but that he was in command, but he brought no staff with him, no aide, no runner nor any communications. . . . Technically he was in command and I was the chief of staff; but, I continued to run the operation and kept him informed.<sup>18</sup>

The allied plan of action for 22 March was to continue the attack. ARVN forces were to advance toward Route 1, while the Marine battalions cleared their respective sectors in the southern area of operations. If the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines met further resistance in Phuong Dinh (2) and Thach An Noi (1), Lieutenant Colonel Young's battalion was to attack north, otherwise it was to seize Hill 65, 2,000 meters

southeast of Xuan Hoa, and then advance to the northeast.<sup>19</sup>

As planned, the allied battalions renewed their attacks at daybreak, but encountered little opposition. The Communist forces had slipped away during the night. The 4th ARVN Regimental Task Force secured Khanh My (3) and continued, uncontested, eastward along Route 527. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion took Phuong Dinh (2) and began searching the hamlet and destroying the enemy's defenses. Further south, Lieutenant Colonel Young's 3d Battalion met only scattered resistance as it seized Hill 65 at 1700 that afternoon and then moved to the northeast to set up night defenses. Bodley's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines also successfully carried out its mission, advancing through Thach An Noi (1), and then eastward until it reached a line 2,000 meters east of the hamlet.

When it became apparent that strong enemy forces were no longer in the original Texas objective area, General English and Colonel Peatross decided to extend the operation further south. They ordered the helilift of Bodley's battalion from Thach An Noi (1) to a new area near the Phuoc Loc village complex,



Marine Corps Photo A186816  
MajGen Wood B. Kyle, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, walks with LtCol Paul X. (P. X.) Kelley, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines after the battalion secured Phuong Dinh. The strain of battle is reflected on the faces of the exhausted Marines on each side of the path.

9,000 meters to the southeast just above the Tra Khuc River.<sup>20</sup>

The helicopter landing of Bodley's battalion took place without incident and by 1815 the battalion had secured Hill 23, 500 meters north of Phuoc Loc (1). With the command group remaining on the hill and Company I in blocking positions to the west, Companies K and L advanced on the hamlet. The Marines soon found themselves in the same type of combat that characterized the fighting in Phuong Dinh (2) and Thach An Noi (1) the day before. The enemy force, about two battalions, was firmly entrenched in the hamlet. As the Marine companies

*Marine rifleman escorts a prisoner taken in the fighting for Phuong Dinh. The prisoner is 16 years old.*

Marine Corps Photo A194538



closed in on Phuoc Loc (1), the VC opened fire and stopped the Marine advance. Heavy fighting continued until after dark, but the Marine battalion remained unable to penetrate the enemy's defenses.

Soon after making contact, the Marines called for air and artillery support. The artillery response was immediate; the task force artillery group fired almost 2,000 155mm rounds in support of the 3d Battalion. When the artillery was not active, jets from both MAG-11 and MAG-12 bombed and strafed the objective area.

The 1st MAW had made some adjustments to bring in fixed-wing support for the operation. When Task Force Delta was activated, General McCutcheon sent Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Savage from MAG-11 to Chu Lai to be the assistant tactical air commander for the operation. Savage placed the fixed-wing support aircraft on ground alert, rather than on combat air patrols. By keeping the jets on 15-minute ground alert and by close monitoring of the tactical situation, he could scramble the "... aircraft when it became apparent that they would be needed."<sup>21</sup>

On the morning of 23 March, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines secured Phuoc Loc (1). Again the VC had slipped out during the night. Bodley's battalion remained in the hamlet to destroy the extensive fortifications there. In their search, the Marines discovered an outer and inner ring of trenches and over 300 fighting holes. The Marine battalion also uncovered two intricate tunnel networks which explained how the enemy was able to get out of Phuoc Loc. According to the villagers, the VC had divided into two groups, one of which crossed the Tra Kruc River by boat while the other escaped on foot to the west.

Questioning the residents of Phuoc Loc (1) with the assistance of an ARVN intelligence officer and local authorities, the Marines learned that the enemy force had suffered substantial casualties. Apparently anticipating a battle, the VC had taken 30 men of the hamlet to serve as stretcher bearers on the afternoon of 22 March. They later returned and impressed 80 more people, including old men, women, and children, to haul away the dead and wounded. One old couple told the Marines that they had counted 30-32 dead and about 100 wounded VC being carried past their house. A 56-year old farmer stated that he had seen another 36 bodies shuttled toward the river. Some villagers provided distorted figures

obviously to please the Americans; one estimate was 500 dead. Most of the inhabitants of the hamlet remained in their family shelters during the fighting and could not have seen anything. Although finding no enemy bodies in Phuoc Loc (1), Lieutenant Colonel Bodley, as a result of an analysis of the interrogations, reported 60 enemy dead. The Marine battalion lost seven men killed and 56 wounded in the same engagement.<sup>22</sup>

On the morning of 23 March, the 4th ARVN Regimental Task Force encountered a VC force just west of the railroad on Route 527, killing 40 of the enemy. This engagement was the last significant action of the combined operation. The Marines continued Operation Texas for two more days in order to complete mopping up in Phuoc Loc (1) and Phuong Dinh (2).

On 24 March, General English deactivated Task Force Delta, and the 7th Marines reassumed control of the operation.\* The Marines closed out Texas the following day. From captured enemy documents, the allies determined that they had encountered elements of three battalions, the 60th and 90th from the 1st VC Regiment and the 11th from the 21st NVA Regiment. The Marines reported killing 283 enemy troops while sustaining casualties of 99 dead and 212 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion found 168 of the enemy dead in Phuong Dinh (2).<sup>23</sup>

A few days later, Kelley offered the following analysis of his battalion's experience in Operation Texas, which for the most part held true for the other Marine battalions which participated in the operation:

The overriding problem in Operation Texas was one which had plagued the Marine Corps for many years: how to inflict maximum loss on a determined, well-entrenched enemy with complex defensive positions at a minimum loss to one's own forces. In the case of Phuong Dinh (2) over 2,500 rounds of artillery and innumerable air strikes with napalm and heavy ordnance were called. The net result, however, indicated that the enemy in well-constructed bunkers, in holes with overhead cover and 20-foot deep tunnels was not appreciably hurt by our preparatory fires and had to be killed in his positions by infantry action at close quarters.<sup>24</sup>



Marine Corps Photo A186818  
Gen William C. Westmoreland, ComUSMACV (center), attends briefing on Operation Texas. Col Oscar F. Peatross (on the right of the picture) holds the briefing charts while BGen Lowell E. English, Commanding General, Task Force Delta (to the left and rear of Westmoreland), and Gen Hoang Xuan Lam, Commanding General, 2d ARVN Division (left), look on.

General Westmoreland visited Phuong Dinh (2) on 24 March and observed the extent of the enemy defenses. He had Colonel Peatross assemble the two battalions in the area and thanked them personally for their performance. Later, he sent a congratulatory message to General Walt. The MACV commander complimented the Marine units in the operation for their aggressive spirit and close coordination. General Walt added his "well done."<sup>25</sup>

There was a short epilogue to Texas—Operation Indiana. Early on the morning of 28 March, the 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, which had remained in positions near the hamlet of Lam Loc (1) approximately 1,500 meters east of Phuoc Loc (1), repulsed several attacks by an estimated Communist regiment. The Marine command reinforced the ARVN forces when Marine helicopters brought Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kelly's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines into a landing zone 2,000 meters northwest of Lam Loc (1) late that afternoon. The 1st Battalion was to establish blocking positions 2,000 meters to the southwest on the northern bank of the

\*General Peatross commented that the deactivation of Task Force Delta merely consisted of General English flying back to Da Nang. MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, Comments on draft MS, dtd 1Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

Tra Khuc, but Kelly's Company C ran into an estimated enemy battalion in the hamlet of Vinh Loc (2), about 500 meters northwest of the landing zone. Shortly after 1900, after taking heavy casualties, the company fell back, so that Marine supporting arms could hit the enemy forces.

On the following day, Kelly's 1st Battalion renewed the assault on Vinh Loc (2) while Lieutenant Colonel Utter's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines deployed into blocking positions 3,000 meters north of Vinh Loc (2). By this time the enemy units had disengaged and escaped during the night. Kelly's battalion captured one VC and 19 weapons in Vinh Loc (2). The Marines killed 69 of the enemy while the ARVN forces claimed another 100 Communist dead. Marine losses were 11 dead and 45 wounded, nearly all from the 1st Battalion's Company C. The 7th Marines ended Indiana on 30 March.<sup>26</sup>

Colonel Peatross observed that his battalions fought these March battles largely as integral units. Headquarters and support personnel filled in the gaps in the Chu Lai defenses left by the infantry. Paymaster personnel logged more time in the defense than any other unit at Chu Lai. Peatross later wrote that his 7th Marines had two distinct advantages over other regiments during his tour in Vietnam: "it had one regimental commander and no changes in the battalion commanders, and these units were always together. . . ." <sup>27</sup>\* In any event, the month of March had proven to be a bloody one for both the allies and Communist forces in southern I Corps.

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\*Colonel Leon N. Utter, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines during this period, reinforced Colonel Peatross' observations on the importance of unit integrity: " platoons, companies and battalions are *not* interchangeable parts of identical machines. . . . As a battalion commander, I frequently was directed to provide a platoon or a company to someone else's headquarters for operations. My answer was, invariably, 'Assign me the mission and let me take my own people! While this required the replacement of 'my own people' on the line—we went to the field as 2/7. We *knew* each other, how to *communicate*; we had our common experiences and lessons learned and mistakes made; we could anticipate one another. While we frequently distressed administrators and logisticians by wanting to fight as a *unit*, it is my not-too-humble opinion that our tactical successes proved, repeatedly, the validity of the concept and justification of the effort.'" Col Leon N. Utter, Comments on draft MS, dtd 13Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

### *Expansion at Chu Lai*

Between August 1965 and January 1966, the headquarters and battalions of the 1st and 7th Marines had entered Vietnam incrementally, while the division's support and combat support elements had arrived in small echelons, often bumping against the total in-country personnel ceiling established by Washington. In February the last units of the 1st Marine Division departed Camp Pendleton for Okinawa, and on 9 March the division officially closed its rear headquarters at the California base. By the end of March, nearly all of the division, including the aforementioned two infantry regiments, the 11th Marines with three of its four artillery battalions, the 1st Tank Battalion, the 1st Motor Transport Battalion, the 1st Engineer Battalion, the 1st Medical Battalion, and the 1st Shore Party Battalion, was in Vietnam. Only the 5th Marines; the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines; and a few support units remained on Okinawa. A few days before he and his headquarters left for Vietnam, Major General Lewis J. Fields, the division commander, received the following message from General Krulak: "You met every deadline and every shipping date and when your unit sailed they were ready to fight. No one could ask more."<sup>28</sup>\*\*

On 29 March, General Fields arrived at Da Nang. After a brief meeting with General Walt, he went on to Chu Lai where he established the division command post. That afternoon he assumed operational control of all Marine ground forces at Chu Lai and also became the deputy commander of III MAF. In this capacity General Fields was the Chu Lai installation coordinator responsible for the security of all

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\*\*There had been some thought given to retaining a division rear headquarters on Okinawa under the assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles, who had arrived from Camp Pendleton in mid-February. It was decided, however, in order to avoid administrative and fiscal complications, not to establish an official division rear. Instead Brigadier General Stiles, with a small personal staff, was assigned on 30 March as a double-hatted commanding general of both Task Force 79 and the newly established 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB) on Okinawa. General Stiles was relieved of these temporary assignments and assumed his duties as assistant division commander at Chu Lai on 15 April 1966. 1st Mar Div ComdCs, Feb-April 1966. See Chapter 18 for further discussion of the 9th MAB.





Marine Corps Photo A194540

*A joint honor guard of the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions passes in review at a ceremony at Da Nang marking the arrival of the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam. The 1st Marine Division Headquarters was established at Chu Lai while the 3d Division retained control of Marine units at Da Nang and Phu Bai.*

organizations and facilities located within the TAOR. To meet these requirements, he activated the Chu Lai Defense Command and tasked it with the defense of vital areas on Ky Ha Peninsula, the SATS airfield, and the supply complex. This command consisted of two rifle companies from one of the infantry battalions and two platoons each from the tank and antitank battalions. An additional 400 personnel from the ground elements of the two aircraft groups augmented the defenses.

Colonel Glen E. Martin, who had been Chief of Staff of the former ADC group at Chu Lai, recalled the initial nervousness of some of the newly arrived troops, who had taken over security of the division CP area. He remembered that "About midnight a few rounds were fired, followed by several explosions from hand grenades. Then firing became continuous

by the CP Security Group." Martin "finally brought an end to the firing by going to each security point in a jeep with the lights on, putting the lights on the security point, and walking in the lights to the Marine sentry on duty." The colonel then identified himself and advised "the Marine there were better things to do than fire at his fellow Marines." The firing finally stopped and Martin and another officer went to the 7th Marines "regimental mess for coffee."<sup>29</sup>

There was some modification in the disposition and control of the Chu Lai infantry regiments and battalions. The 7th Marines, with all three of its battalions under its operational control, continued to be responsible for the southern half of the TAOR, but received a new commander. On 7 April, Colonel Eugene H. Haffey relieved Colonel Peatross, whose



Marine Corps Photo A801960

*The photo depicts an aerial view of the Chu Lai base area in April 1966, looking south. The 1st Division Headquarters is located approximately in the middle of the picture.*

tour in Vietnam was about to come to an end. Colonel Haffey had been the 1st Marine Division comptroller and according to General Fields, "a most valued member" of his staff.<sup>30</sup>

The major changes at Chu Lai were made in the 1st Marines sector as the battalions of the 5th Marines arrived. On 13 April, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines landed at Chu Lai and on the following day it replaced the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in the 1st Marines sector. The latter battalion, which had been under the operational control of the 1st Marines, moved to Da Nang. Colonel Byran B. Mitchell, the 1st Marines commander, now had his own 3d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, under his control. On 22 May, the 3d Battalion, 1st Marines also displaced to Da Nang and was replaced in the 1st Marines northern sector by the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which had been relieved earlier in the month by BLT 3/5 as the SLF battalion. Finally on 27 May, Colonel Charles F. Widdecke, a holder of both the Navy Cross and Silver Star earned in World War II, brought the 5th Marines' Headquarters from Okinawa to Chu Lai. On 3 June, Widdecke's headquarters assumed control of the 1st and 2d Bat-

*The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines debark from UH-34s in an unopposed landing south of Chu Lai in April 1966. From April through June, the 1st Division units at Chu Lai conducted 10 battalion-size operations.*

Marine Corps Photo A373657







Marine Corps Photo A369046

*The 7th Marines display U.S. manufactured weapons captured during Operation Hot Springs. The weapons include Browning automatic rifles in the foreground, .30 and .50 caliber machine guns, and 106mm recoilless rifles.*

talions, 5th Marines, while the 1st Marines Headquarters transferred to Da Nang.

In June 1966, the 1st Marine Division at Chu Lai consisted of over 17,000 men in two infantry regiments of three and two battalions respectively, an artillery regiment of four battalions, and other supporting units including engineer, tank, amtrac, antitank, and reconnaissance battalions, as well as separate detachments. Future plans called for the deployment to Chu Lai of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and reinforcement by the Korean Marine Brigade later in the summer.

The Chu Lai TAOR had expanded from 205 square miles at the beginning of the year to 340 square miles at the end of June. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines established its command post on Hill 54, some 10 miles north of the airfield and only six miles south of Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province. The Marines planned that the Da Nang and Chu Lai TAORs would meet at Tam Ky, a point equidistant between the two enclaves, by the end of the year.

In the Chu Lai TAOR, the division continued to use the same combination of battalion and indepen-

dent small-unit actions that had characterized earlier operations. From April through June, 1st Marine Division units at Chu Lai launched 10 battalion-sized operations outside the division TAOR. In one, Operation Hot Springs in April, the 7th Marines again engaged the *1st VC Regiment* in the same general area where Utah, Texas, and Indiana had taken place. The Marines killed over 150 of the enemy and captured 23 weapons, including 6 that were crew-served. Although carefully planned and executed, the other nine large operations had minimal contact with the NVA and VC. On the other hand, the small-unit actions within the TAOR increased during this period. Marine patrols and ambushes rose from 2,285 in April, resulting in 11 enemy dead, to nearly 2,900 in June resulting in 72 enemy dead.<sup>31</sup>

### *Operation Kansas*

At the beginning of June, the 1st Marine Division turned its attention toward the Do Xa Region, a suspected enemy base area, 30 miles southwest of Chu Lai near the western border of I Corps. MACV placed the headquarters of the enemy *Military Region V* in the Do Xa and for some time had wanted the Marines to mount an operation there. Since late April and shortly after his arrival at Chu Lai, the 1st Division assistant division commander, Brigadier General William A. Stiles, a 1939 Naval Academy graduate and seasoned campaigner, commanded a special task force headquarters, Task Force X-Ray, to plan a reconnaissance in force in the Do Xa. After some postponements and some problems with coordination, Stiles and his staff had completed their plans for the Do Xa when disturbing reports reached III MAF that the enemy's *2d Division*, also known as the *620th NVA Division*, with all three regiments, the *3d NVA*, the *21st NVA*, and the *1st VC*, had entered the Que Son Valley straddling the Quang Tin-Quang Nam provincial boundaries northwest of Chu Lai.<sup>32</sup>

Control of the Que Son Valley was important to both sides, and it had been the area of operations for both Double Eagle II in February and Harvest Moon the preceding December. Bounded by mountains on the north, south, and west, the valley extends some 24 miles east to west from Route 1 to Hiep Duc. The Ly Ly River and Routes 534 and 535 traverse most of

its length. Supporting a population of 60,000 persons, the valley contains some of the best farmland in Vietnam as well as rich salt deposits. General Thi, the former I Corps commander, once described the Que Son area as one of the keys to the struggle for I Corps.<sup>33</sup>

Faced with the reported incursion of North Vietnamese units into the strategic Que Son Valley, Generals Walt and Fields had little choice but to postpone the Do Xa operation. On 13 June, they ordered an extensive reconnaissance campaign between Tam Ky and Hiep Duc and directed General Stiles' Task Force X-Ray Headquarters to begin planning for a combined operation with the 2d ARVN Division. The concept of operations for the reconnaissance effort called for the insertion of six teams from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and a seventh team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company into selected landing zones to determine the extent of the NVA penetration. On the 13th, the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion's command group, which was to control the reconnaissance operation, and a 13-man reconnaissance team were to be helilifted to Nui Loc Son, a small mountain in the center of the Que Son Valley and some seven miles northeast of Hiep Duc. Another 18-man reconnaissance team, on the same date, was to be landed on the Nui Vu hill mass that dominates the terrain approximately 10 miles west of Tam Ky. These initial landings were to be followed on the next day by the insertion of the remaining teams—two to the higher ground just south of the valley, two to the northwest of the valley, and one to the south of Hiep Duc. The last group, a 13-man team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, was to make a parachute drop on Hill 555 just east of the Tranh River.<sup>34</sup>

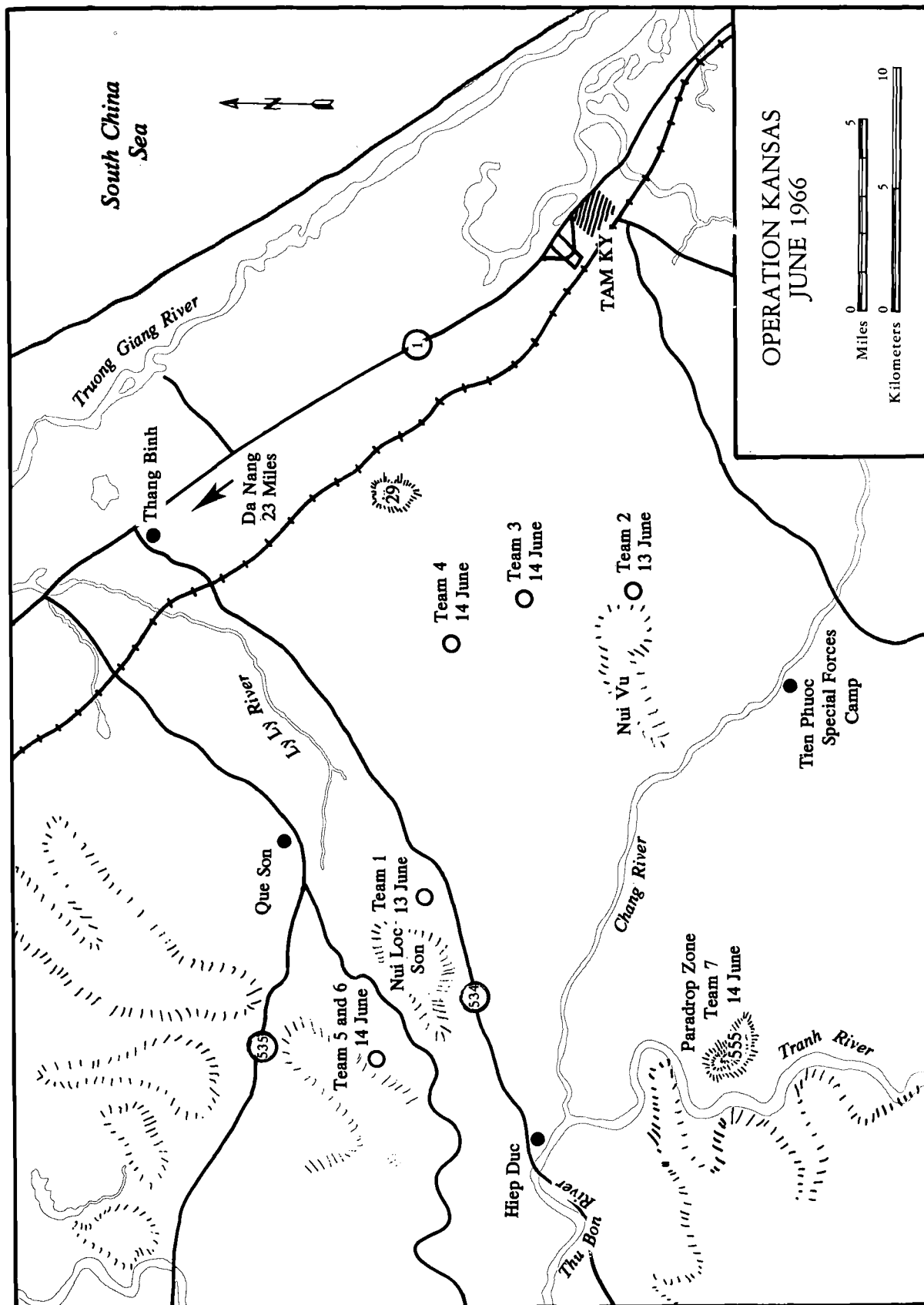
The insertion of the reconnaissance teams went much as planned. During the early evening of 13 June, the first two reconnaissance teams had landed on Nui Vu and Nui Loc Son and Lieutenant Colonel Arthur J. Sullivan, the commanding officer of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, had established his command post at Nui Loc Son. On the night of 13-14 June, the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company team made a successful parachute drop from an Army transport into their objective area. Their only casualty was one man who slightly twisted his ankle on landing. Marine helicopters brought the four remaining teams from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion into their respective landing zones without in-

cident late on the evening of 14 June, thus completing the first phase of the operation.<sup>35</sup>

The team from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company was the first to be extracted from its zone of action. Upon landing, the men had buried their parachutes and climbed Hill 555, where they established their observation post. The team during the course of the morning and afternoon of the 14th spotted approximately 40 armed enemy dressed in khaki or "black pajamas" and wearing sun helmets, some of whom were apparently undergoing tactical training. At about 1830, two woodcutters with a dog came across the spot where the team had hidden its parachutes. The dog apparently detected an unfamiliar scent and the woodcutters found one of the chutes and immediately departed. About a half hour later, the Marines observed the two woodcutters accompanied by nine armed men moving along the eastern bank of the Tranh River, obviously looking for someone. At this point, 1st Lieutenant Jerome T. Paull, the patrol leader, asked that his men be extracted from their position. Shortly afterward, a Marine helicopter brought the men back to Chu Lai.<sup>36</sup>

Of the remaining patrols, the 18-man team led by Staff Sergeant Jimmie L. Howard on Nui Vu was to have the sharpest encounter with the enemy forces. After their insertion on the 13th, Howard's men found the 1,500-foot hill an excellent observation platform and for the next two days reported extensive enemy activity in the region. Supported by an ARVN 105mm battery located at the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp, seven miles south of Nui Vu, the Marines called artillery missions on targets of opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

Although Howard had taken the precaution to call the fire missions only when an American spotter plane or helicopter was in the area, the enemy by the 15th had become aware of the patrol's presence in the area. Late that night, a patrol from the Special Forces camp reported an enemy battalion moving toward Nui Vu from the southeast. Between 2130 and 2330, Howard called for artillery support as the Marines heard North Vietnamese troops massing at the bottom of the hill. Shortly after midnight, the Communists probed the Marine defenses and then followed with a three-sided, all-out attack. According to the Navy corpsman with the Marines, the enemy forces, " . . . were within 20 feet of us. Suddenly there were grenades all over. Then people



started hollering. It seemed everybody got hit at the same time." Despite the intensity of the enemy assault, which was supported by heavy machine gun fire, the Marine perimeter held. Howard radioed Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, his battalion commander, "You've gotta get us out of here . . . There are too many of them for my people." Sullivan attempted to reassure the patrol leader and told him that assistance would be on the way.<sup>38</sup>

About 0200, supporting air arrived overhead including Marine and Air Force flare planes, helicopters, and attack aircraft. Under the light of the flares, Marine jets and Huey gunships attacked the enemy forces massing at the bottom of the hill. At times, VMO-6 gunships strafed to within 20 meters of the patrol's perimeter and the fixed-wing aircraft dropped bombs and napalm as close as 100 meters. At 0300, enemy ground fire drove off a flight of MAG-36 helicopters which were trying to pick up the patrol. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan told Howard that the patrol could not expect any reinforcements until dawn and to hold on as best he could.\*

The action on and around the hill was reduced to small, scattered, individual fire fights. Wary of the U.S. aircraft orbiting overhead, the Communist forces decided against another mass assault, but continued to fire at the Marines throughout the night. Running short of ammunition, Howard and his men fired single shots and threw rocks at suspected enemy positions, hoping that the NVA would mistake the rocks for grenades. The fighting was exacting a heavy toll on the reconnaissance patrol; each man had been wounded at least once and six were dead. Sergeant Howard was struck in the back by a ricochet, temporarily paralyzing his legs. Unable to use his lower limbs, Howard pulled himself from hole to hole, encouraging his men and directing fire.

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\*Colonel Zitnik commented on the extensive effort by VMO-6 to support Howard's patrol: "Huey availability was down to three aircraft during these early hours, yet continuous TAC(A) [tactical air controller (airborne)] and gunship support was provided with the TAC(A) working without his gunship escort. Helicopters refueled at Ky Ha where they returned with gauges indicating near zero each flight. . . . Crews were not rotated as there was no time to brief new crews. They merely reported while the aircraft were refueling and returned to the scene." Col Robert J. Zitnik, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Jun78 (Vietnam Comment Files).



Marine Corps Photo A414461

*SSgt Jimmie C. Howard is seen wearing his Medal of Honor and other medals. Sgt Howard's platoon stood off a NVA battalion on Nui Vu, later called "Howard's Hill," near the Que Son Valley north of Chu Lai.*

At dawn on 16 June, MAG-36 UH-34s, escorted by Huey gunships, safely landed Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines near the base of Nui Vu. One of the gunships, however, piloted by Major William J. Goodsell, the commanding officer of VMO-6, was hit by enemy fire and crash landed. Both Major Goodsell and his copilot were evacuated, but Goodsell later died of his wounds. Lieutenant Colonel Zitnik, who had commanded the squadron until March, remembered that Colonel Johnson, the commanding officer of MAG-36, was the TAC(A) for the mission and observed an enemy soldier "throw a grenade into the downed helo but elected not to divert forces from the primary rescue mission of Sergeant Howard."<sup>39</sup>

The Marine company on the ground met some resistance as it advanced up Nui Vu to relieve Howard's patrol. When the relief force finally reached the top of the hill, Howard greeted them with the warning, "Get down . . . There are snipers right in

front of us." First Lieutenant Marshall B. "Buck" Darling, the Company C commander, remembered that he found Howard's men mostly armed with AK-47s taken from dead North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese, later identified as a battalion from the *3d NVA Regiment*, continued to battle the Marines for control of the hill until noon, and then disengaged. They left behind 42 dead and 19 weapons while Company C suffered two dead and two wounded.<sup>40\*</sup>

By this time, General Stiles and his Task Force X-Ray Headquarters had completed the planning for a combined operation with the ARVN, codenamed Kansas, in the Que Son region. These plans called for a force of eight infantry battalions, four from III MAF and four from the 2d ARVN Division, supported by air and artillery, to take part in the operation. Two battalions from the 5th Marines and two Vietnamese Marine Battalions, attached to the 2d ARVN Division for the operation, were to make up the initial assault force. The Task Force X-Ray and 2d ARVN Division Headquarters were to be collocated at Tam Ky.<sup>41</sup>

In anticipation of Kansas, III MAF on 16 June deployed artillery units from both Da Nang and Chu Lai into forward firing positions on Hill 29, just west of the railroad some seven miles north of Tam Ky, and near Thang Binh, nine miles further north on Route 1. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines with a command group and two companies accompanied the artillery from Da Nang and provided security for the gun positions at both Hill 29 and Thang Binh. Battery K, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines with six 155mm howitzers (towed) and the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines Headquarters were in position on Hill 29 and Provisional Battery Y, 4th Battalion, 12th Marines was near Thang Binh with two 155mm howitzers (towed).<sup>42</sup>

Shortly after General Stiles established his forward headquarters at Tam Ky on 17 June, General Walt reduced the scope of the proposed operation. That morning, General Lam, the I Corps commander, had informed Walt that the two Vietnamese Marine battalions would not be available for Kansas because

of the political situation in Hue. The I Corps commander was sending one of the battalions to that city and wanted to keep the other at Da Nang in case the trouble spread there. General Walt agreed to delay the operations, and, at the same time decided to change the Kansas plan of action. Instead of a multibattalion heliborne operation in the Que Son Valley, Walt elected to continue the reconnaissance effort of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion supported by the Marine artillery already deployed in the field. The 5th Marines would remain in the Chu Lai TAOR, but remain ready to exploit the situation in the event the reconnaissance teams came across a sizeable body of enemy troops. General Stiles' headquarters with the 5th Marines would control the operation.<sup>43</sup>

During the next few days, the Marines reinforced the artillery and repositioned some of the guns to provide better coverage for the reconnaissance teams. On 18 June, Battery K, 4th Battalion, 11th Marines with four 155mm howitzers (SP), joined the 4th Battalion Headquarters on Hill 29, and, at the same time, the provisional battery from the 12th Marines deployed to new firing positions, some 6,000 meters southwest of Thang Binh. The following day, Battery K of the 12th Marines moved from Hill 29 and linked up with the provisional battery further north. On the 19th as well, two especially prepared CH-46 helicopters lifted two 105mm howitzers from Battery D, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, from the Chu Lai TAOR to the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp, a distance of some 30 miles. The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which came under the operational control of the 5th Marines on 17 June, provided security for the artillery near Route 1 while the ARVN provided the security for the Marine and South Vietnamese 105mm batteries at Tien Phuoc.<sup>44</sup>

With the supporting arms largely in position, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan, the reconnaissance battalion commander, had moved his forward CP on 18 June from Loc Son to the Tien Phuoc Special Forces Camp. From the 19th through 28 June, the reconnaissance battalion, reinforced by two platoons of the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company and the 2d ARVN Division Reconnaissance Company, continued to conduct extensive patrolling throughout the Que Son region. Beginning with the initial entry on 13 June, 25 reconnaissance teams took part in the operation. With the exception of the parachute drop

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\*For this action, 15 men of Howard's platoon were awarded the Silver Star and two more the Navy Cross. Staff Sergeant Howard was awarded the Medal of Honor.

and two other patrols that walked into their target areas from forward bases, Marine helicopters inserted and extracted the Marine reconnaissance teams.<sup>45</sup>

Operation Kansas, which officially began on 17 June and ended on the 22d when General Stiles closed his Tam Ky headquarters, never expanded much beyond the reconnaissance stage. The Marine infantry participation, with the exception of the relief of Howard's platoon, was confined to a one-company exploitation of a B-52 Arc Light strike on 21 June in rugged terrain 3,500 meters east of Hiep Duc. Shortly before 0900, Marine helicopters landed Company E, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in the landing zone near the B-52 bomb impact area. Although encountering some minor resistance near the landing zone, the Marine company found little evidence of any large body of enemy forces. By 1015, the last elements of the company had reembarked on board helicopters for the return flight to Chu Lai.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the official end of Kansas on 22 June, both the Marine artillery and reconnaissance teams remained deployed in and around the Que Son Valley for six more days. Throughout the entire period from 13 June through 27 June, the reconnaissance teams made 141 sightings and observed a total of 763 enemy troops. The teams had a direct communication link with the fire direction center with the 4th Battalion, 11th Marines on Hill 29 and could call upon artillery and air. Marine jets flew, and the artillery batteries fired, an equal number of missions, 43 each, in support of the reconnaissance Marines. In addition, the USS *Morton* (DD 948) provided naval gunfire support, firing 384 rounds of naval gunfire at suspected enemy positions. In one of the more successful actions, a Marine reconnaissance outpost brought artillery fire upon a small force of NVA, killing all seven of the enemy. The Marines then asked "the guns to remain laid on this position." Soon afterward, more NVA arrived to remove the bodies and the Marines called artillery down upon this new group, inflicting another 10 casualties on the North Vietnamese. Exclusive of the

enemy killed in the fight for Nui Vu, the Marine reconnaissance teams by calling upon supporting arms accounted for 85 enemy dead as well as 40 elephants and 10 water buffalo. The Marines sustained casualties of nine killed and 20 wounded. All of the Marine dead and 14 of the wounded were as a result of the NVA attack on Nui Vu.<sup>47</sup>

More significant than the comparative casualty ratio was the fact that a relatively few reconnaissance Marines, supported by air and artillery, prevented the NVA from massing their forces and penetrating the Que Son Valley in strength. As Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan observed:

Whatever his [the enemy's] intentions for forming in that area, this recon effort supported by fire broke up his formations, caused him to move, and inflicted casualties upon him and his logistic buildup. . . . He is particularly vulnerable to observed fire and air strikes.<sup>48</sup>

The experience of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion in Operation Kansas was an exceptional one. Usually it fell to the infantry to tramp the rough terrain on both large operations and small-unit patrols to seek out the illusive enemy and destroy him in sharp fire fights. In Kansas the Marines did it a different way.

By the end of June, III MAF reported substantial progress against the enemy in southern I Corps and in the pacification of the Chu Lai TAOR. In contrast to Da Nang and Phu Bai, the spring political crisis had little impact on the Chu Lai base. The 2d ARVN Division, which operated in this area, had remained loyal to the government, and its commander, General Lam, had become the I Corps commander. The extensive Marine operations in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces and the reconnaissance campaign in the Que Son Valley had succeeded in keeping the enemy's large units out of the coastal populated areas. Moreover, statistics compiled by the Marines and pacification teams showed that nearly 30,000 of the 160,000 people in the Chu Lai TAOR lived in villages that scored more than 80 percent on Marine pacification indices. There was every reason for optimism by midyear.<sup>49</sup>

PART IV  
THE DMZ WAR





## CHAPTER 9

# The Enemy Buildup in the North

*Speculation about the Enemy's Intentions—Reconnaissance at Khe Sanh, Operation Virginia—Marine Operations in Thua Thien, April-May 1966—Contingency Planning and Reconnaissance at Dong Ha—Politics and War—Heavy Fighting in Thua Thien Province—Further Reconnaissance in the North*

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### *Speculation About the Enemy's Intentions*

Throughout the period of political unrest and the expansion of the Marine base areas at Da Nang and Chu Lai, General Westmoreland continued to be concerned about northern I Corps and speculated about Communist intentions there. As early as February at the Honolulu Conference, he told President Johnson that if he were an enemy general he would attempt to "capture Hue." The MACV commander made the point that the former imperial capital was a "symbol of a united Vietnam," and its loss would have a traumatic effect upon the allied war effort. He periodically referred to the military advantages for the enemy to make a thrust in the north. Westmoreland argued that such a move not only shortened the lines of communication for the NVA, but that the mountain spur north of Da Nang effectively isolates the two northern provinces of Thua Thien and Quang Tri from the rest of South Vietnam and made them particularly vulnerable to an enemy attack. Any allied reinforcements along Route 1 and the railroad, the only north-south arteries, had to wend their way through the narrow

confines of the strategic Hai Van Pass, which was subject to enemy harassment. The Marines only kept the pass open through extensive patrolling and armed "Rough Rider" road convoys. Through March, the enemy effectively closed the railroad between Da Nang and Hue 50 percent of the time.<sup>1</sup>

Intelligence reports and events reinforced Westmoreland's belief that the enemy was staging his forces in the north for a major offensive. He contended that the fall of A Shau may have been only a prelude for a later attack on Hue itself. Allied intelligence estimates placed the enemy infiltration into South Vietnam as averaging 7,000 men a month during the period January through March of 1966. Several sources reported the massing of North Vietnamese units in Laos opposite the border with Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. In early April, MACV received information that the North Vietnamese had begun to move their 324B Division from Ha Tinh, 180 kilometers north of the DMZ, into southern North Vietnam. The MACV enemy order of battle carried three enemy regiments and indicated the possible existence of a fourth in the two northern provinces of South Vietnam. In addition, other intelligence revealed the establishment of a

*A view of the Royal Palace in Hue as photographed in February 1966. Hue was the former imperial capital of Vietnam and stood as a "symbol of a united Vietnam."*

Marine Corps Photo A187610



major enemy headquarters in north central Thua Thien Province, some 20 miles west of Hue. At first, allied intelligence officers believed the headquarters to be that of a division, but later identified it as that of the newly formed *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region*, which reported directly to the North Vietnamese command.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to MACV, General Walt and his staff read the intelligence data differently. Although acknowledging some buildup of enemy forces in the two northern provinces, they saw little evidence of any major enemy all-out offensive. The III MAF intelligence section, in comparison to the MACV J-2, was relatively conservative in giving credence to the establishment of enemy regimental organizations in northern I Corps. As opposed to the three and possibly four enemy regiments carried by MACV, III MAF officially placed the third regimental headquarters, the *6th NVA*, in its order of battle only on 15 April. Moreover, the Marines contended that since the arrival of the 4th Marines at Phu Bai in late March, contact with the enemy had been sparse. Although throughout April reports reached the 4th Marines of the movement of large Communist forces into the area, an extensive reconnaissance effort "failed to confirm a significant buildup in the approaches leading into Hue-Phu Bai."<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the failure of the enemy to react to the Marine reinforcement of its northern base, Colonel Donald W. Sherman, the commander of the 4th Marines, later stated, "I don't think the enemy was planning anything against Phu Bai at the time."<sup>4</sup> Further north, the 1st ARVN Division, with the exception of two relatively small engagements on 28 March and 10 April, also encountered few Communist forces. Even General Westmoreland remarked on the lull in enemy activity, but quickly observed that he believed the Communists were preparing the battlefield.<sup>5</sup>

At a MACV commanders' conference on 21 April, Westmoreland asked General Walt if the III MAF commander had any reason to doubt the number of major NVA units in I Corps that were being carried by the MACV J-2. Walt replied that his forces in extensive long-range reconnaissance operations had been unable to verify the existence of any large body of enemy troops. He then declared, "If they [the NVA] were there, that they were hiding in the mountains not far from the Laos border."<sup>6</sup> Throughout this period, the Marines resisted, as one III MAF staff officer remembered, every effort to

"get us extended" and away from the pacification campaign further south.<sup>7</sup>

### *Reconnaissance at Khe Sanh, Operation Virginia*

Despite such reluctance, the Marines in April, at the insistence of General Westmoreland, conducted a one-battalion operation near the isolated Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province. General Westmoreland placed a very high priority on the strategic location of Khe Sanh. Surrounded by high hills and mountains and located 4 miles from the Laotian border, 14 miles south of the DMZ, and 55 miles northwest of Phu Bai, the Khe Sanh base overlooked Route 9, the most feasible entry into Quang Tri Province from the west. Using the base to monitor enemy infiltration and for special reconnaissance operations into Laos, the MACV commander also viewed Khe Sanh as "an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail" if he ever received permission from Washington. He continually stressed to General Walt "the critical importance of the little plateau."<sup>8</sup>

In January 1966, the Communists employed 120mm mortars against the Khe Sanh base, but failed to follow up with a ground assault. Intelligence reports, nevertheless, persisted through the following months of an enemy buildup in the area. At the same time that A Shau fell, the Khe Sanh commander informed MACV that enemy units were staging in the area north of the camp. Fearing that a similar fate awaited Khe Sanh as had befallen A Shau, MACV urged upon the Marines a battalion search and destroy mission in the Khe Sanh sector. III MAF planned such an operation, codenamed *Virginia*, for mid-March, but circumstances, including the Marine commitment to Operation Oregon in northeastern Thua Thien Province, forced the Marine command to postpone the operation. In his meeting with General Walt at Chu Lai on 24 March, General Westmoreland continued to emphasize the dangers in the north.<sup>9</sup>

On 27 March, General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division commander, ordered the 4th Marines at Phu Bai to deploy one battalion, reinforced by a 105mm howitzer battery and a mortar battery, to Khe Sanh. Colonel Sherman selected the 1st Battalion, 1st

Marines to carry out the operation. Lieutenant Colonel Van D. Bell, Jr., who was to assume command of the battalion on 1 April from Lieutenant Colonel Hatch, several years later recalled that he flew to Khe Sanh at the end of March to establish liaison with the Special Forces commander and to get a feel for the terrain. Bell remembered that he found the Special Forces troops "very nervous." According to the Marine officer, the Special Forces were not patrolling, but "trusted this important mission to the Nungs and some ARVN . . .," who often brought in false intelligence. Bell related:

Surprisingly, the Special Forces commander believed their reports. . . . During the S-2 briefing, I was shown the enemy contact profile and it appeared that they had the Special Forces camp surrounded.<sup>10</sup>

After the completion of his visit, Lieutenant Colonel Bell returned to Phu Bai and, on 3 April, issued his operation order for Virginia, scheduled to begin two days later. An advance party consisting of the battalion's executive officer, logistic support personnel, and a rifle platoon from Company C arrived at Khe Sanh on 4 April, but bad weather together with the uncertainties of the South Vietnamese political crisis caused a delay in the beginning of the operation for more than a week. On 17 April, Marine KC-130 aircraft from VMGR-152 began to fly the main body of the Marine battalion into the small airfield at Khe Sanh. Once more weather conditions hindered the operation and forced the Marines to stop the airlift after nearly 50 percent of the Marine force had landed. Finally on the next day, the transports completed the lift of the battalion and its supporting forces to Khe Sanh.<sup>11</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bell established his main base at a coffee plantation just north of the Special Forces camp. His plan called for a three-phased operation within a 10-kilometer radius of Khe Sanh. The Marines were to first search the northeast quadrant, then move to the northwest, and finally to the southwest sector of the area of operations. An ARVN battalion was to secure the southeast quadrant.

On 18 and 19 April, Bell with the assistance of Marine helicopters from HMM-163 moved his forward headquarters, his mortars, an attached reconnaissance platoon, and Company C to a blocking position about six kilometers north of the base camp. Later on the 19th, the Marine helicopters



Marine Corps Photo A193997  
*LtCol Van D. Bell, Jr., Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (sitting right), briefs his company commanders at Khe Sanh in April 1966 during Operation Virginia. Khe Sanh at this time was a Special Forces camp in northwestern South Vietnam near the Laotian border.*

lifted the battalion's remaining companies, A and B, into a landing zone some nine kilometers further to the east.\* According to plan, the two companies then pushed westward along parallel axes toward the blocking positions. Encountering no resistance, except from the dense vegetation, the attacking companies reached their objective on 21 April. The Marine battalion returned to its base camp two days later.

At this point, the Marines decided to modify their plans for Virginia. Based on negative reports from his reconnaissance patrols in the northwestern sector of the battalion's area of operations, Bell cancelled the second phase of the operation. At the same time, staff officers at both the division and MAF levels wanted to expand the operation to determine, if

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\*The battalion's fourth company, Company D, was still at Da Nang under the operational control of the 3d Marines.



Marine Corps Photo A187001  
*Marines from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines scale a steep cliff in Operation Virginia. The photo gives a good depiction of the rugged terrain surrounding Khe Sanh.*

possible, the validity of the claims of an enemy buildup in the north. Colonel George W. Carrington, Jr., the 3d Marine Division G-2, later wrote that he suggested Bell march his battalion "along Route 9 from Khe Sanh east to the sea. It was territory hitherto untouched in the war, but it was important to learn if there was infiltration from the north, across the DMZ."<sup>12</sup> Colonel Chaisson, the III MAF G-3, remembered:

Old "Ding Dong" [Bell] only had one shot fired at his unit in the whole [period] he was up there [at Khe Sanh] . . . But in order for just a little bravado and to do it a little differently from anyone else up there, we let him march

out. So he marched out Highway 9, which was allegedly the first major force that had ever come along Highway 9 in something like eight or nine years.<sup>13</sup>

In preparation for the march, Lieutenant Colonel Bell prepositioned three 105mm howitzers, together with a second command group under his executive officer and a security force, at Ca Lu, 15 miles east of Khe Sanh on Route 9, to cover the infantry. At the same time, the Marine command moved the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines command group and two companies from Phu Bai to Dong Ha, the eastern terminus of Route 9, from where it could provide a reaction force if Bell's battalion ran into trouble. Outside of difficulty with an attached recalcitrant ARVN company and the heat, the 1st Battalion's trek was uneventful. The battalion reached Cam Lo, some 30 miles from Khe Sanh, at the end of the month. On 1 May, the foot-weary troops rode Marine trucks the remaining eight miles to Dong Ha, where they were greeted by both Generals Walt and Westmoreland. The artillery and the second command group had already been retracted.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the dramatic flourish closing out the operation, Virginia's results were inconclusive except to invalidate the reports of the supposed enemy buildup around Khe Sanh. The size of the enemy's

*The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines is seen crossing a bridge along Route 9 during its march from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. The Marine unit was the first allied force to use this route in several years.*

Marine Corps Photo A187769.



forces in the north and his intentions remained a matter of conjecture. As Lieutenant Colonel Bell pointed out in his after-action report:

... it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the extent of enemy presence along the route of march. The failure of the enemy to attack, or even to harass, the march column could have been inspired by either (1) inadequate forces, (2) fear of excessive punishment by Marine supporting arms and aircraft, or (3) a desire to inspire overconfidence in the area later—or any combination of these or lesser factors.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Marine Operations in Thua Thien, April-May 1966*

Throughout April, the enemy avoided any contact with the Marines in Thua Thien Province. At Phu Bai, with the departure of Bell's battalion for Khe Sanh, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines took over from the 1st Battalion the western sector of the TAOR while still providing security for the Phu Bai Vital Area. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Vale continued to operate in the southern portion of the TAOR while Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines remained in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area. All the Phu Bai battalions conducted Golden Fleece rice protection operations while Sullivan's battalion also provided security for Marine reconnaissance teams northwest of Phu Bai. In the only large unit operation in Thua Thien during the month, the SLF battalion of the Seventh Fleet, BLT 1/5, in Operation Osage, made an amphibious landing on 27 April in Phu Loc District, north of the Hai Van Pass. The SLF Marines failed to engage any major enemy unit and reembarked on board their ships on 6 May.

During May, the 4th Marines increased the number of named operations in the Phu Bai area. This increase may have been influenced by the continuing debate with MACV over the statistical measure "battalion days in the field," as much as by intelligence indicating a sharp influx of enemy units in the sector. Since "battalion days in the field" did not include Marine pacification efforts within the TAORs, III MAF compared unfavorably in the number of "battalion days" it attained as opposed to those accumulated by Army units in less densely populated regions. As one Marine officer on the

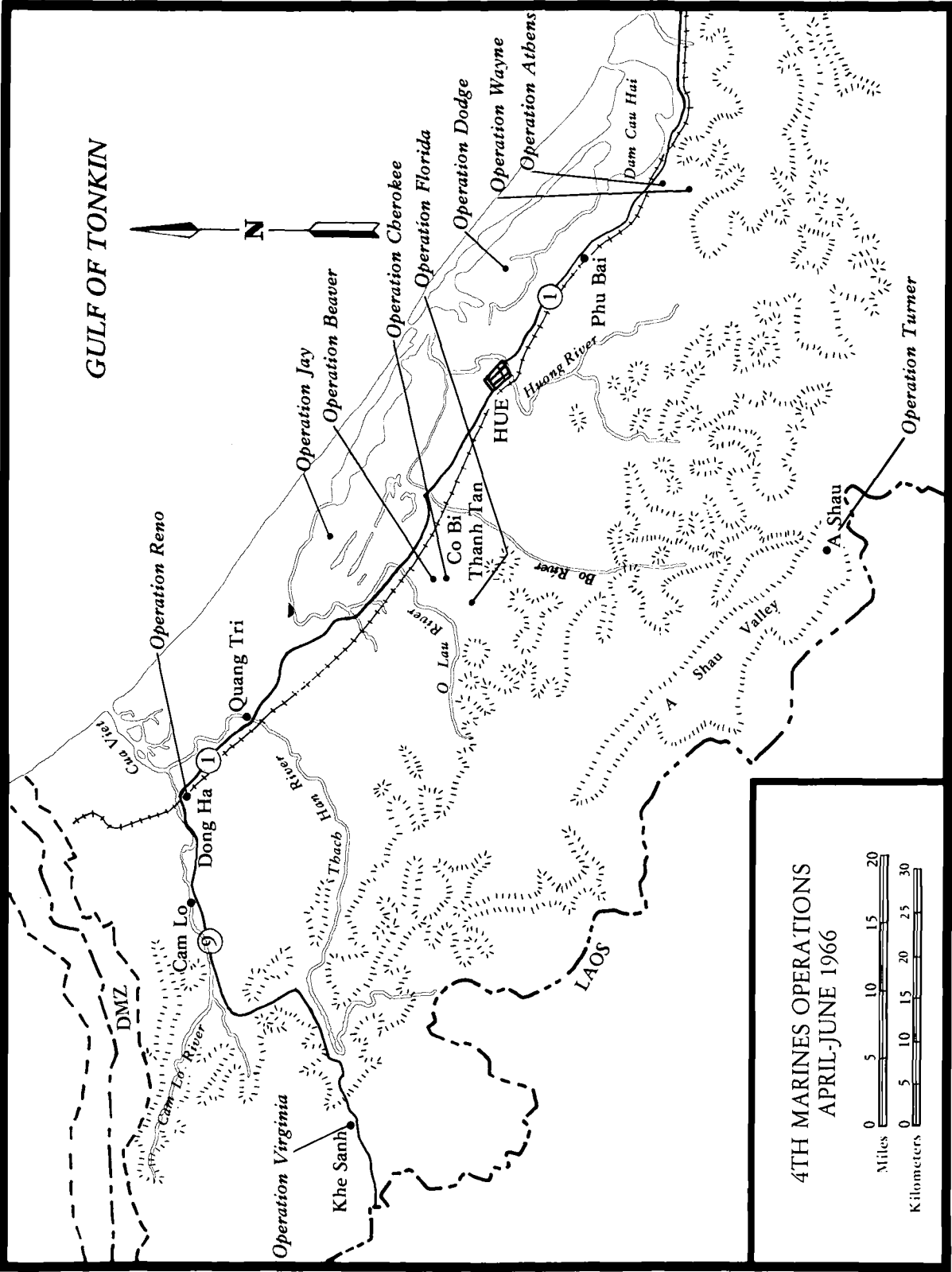
MACV staff, Colonel Francis F. Parry, observed: "It looks as if the Marines are standing on their hands." Parry recalled that he suggested to III MAF that the Marines should play the statistical game "more realistically." He specifically recommended that three of the four battalions at Phu Bai:

... should be considered on operations all the time. ... [This] may seem a little dishonest, but it is something we have to do in self-defense. As long as we are in a statistical war in which the analysts back in the Pentagon are going to look at these statistics every week, we have to put ourselves in as favorable a light as possible.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the Marine rationale may have been, General Westmoreland, on 1 May, remarked that he "was delighted to see that the Marines are planning more operations on a sustained basis."<sup>17</sup>

In the first operation, Operation Cherokee, 5-7 May, Colonel Sherman moved a regimental command group into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan region and reinforced the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines already there with two other battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (back from Virginia) and the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, and supporting units. During the three-day operation, the Marines accounted for nine VC while sustaining losses of one Marine killed and 17 wounded. Then acting on intelligence that the *804th VC Battalion* was in Phu Loc District, some 10 miles south of the Phu Bai Airfield and only one mile south of the TAOR, the 4th Marines on 10-12 May conducted Operation Wayne with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and its own 3d Battalion, supported by artillery and engineers, in the area southwest of Route 1 in this sector. The results were similar to Cherokee; the Marines killed five VC and suffered 11 wounded. After the completion of the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion remained in this area and on 15 May began Operation Athens just northeast of the Wayne area of operations with the mission of keeping Route 1 open. This operation continued into June with only minor enemy resistance.

Based on several sightings and contacts with VC units by Marine reconnaissance patrols in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area in mid-May, the 4th Marines planned a combined operation in that sector with the 1st ARVN Division. The continuing political turmoil in I Corps at this time, however, prevented any such undertaking with the South Vietnamese. The only change that the Marines made in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area at this point was to replace the 1st Bat-



talion, 4th Marines there on 25 May with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion then took over the protection of the Phu Bai Vital Area. Recalling his battalion's activities in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan later wrote: "I'd bet that of all the VC-NVA mortar ammo expended in I Corps during this period, 1/4 was on the receiving end of nearly half of it. As someone once observed, 'Few things in life are as exhilarating as to be shot at with very little result.'" <sup>18</sup>

### *Contingency Planning and Reconnaissance at Dong Ha*

Through this period, General Westmoreland continued to insist on the development of contingency plans to meet any enemy offensive. At the April commanders' conference, he asked that all subordinate commands "work up detailed scenarios of what the enemy might do." In preparing such studies, the MACV commander suggested that the U.S. planners assume that the Communists "will try to suck us into a fight on a field of their choosing," and that it was "necessary to wargame in order to avoid barging into battle at a disadvantage." He further told the assembled commanders that they could not depend upon MACV for reserves since the enemy might strike in more than one place and that they should plan accordingly. <sup>19</sup>

Other U.S. commands, outside of MACV, were also preparing contingency studies. Earlier in the month, the U.S. Army Pacific presented a plan to CinCPac that called for the establishment of a two-division Army corps which would be deployed north along the DMZ and extend into Laos. According to the Army planners, such a move would take "the war out of the south," and bring it "to the north, where we can fight better and make the enemy mass near the DMZ." <sup>20</sup>

Although General Westmoreland was reluctant to move any Army troops into I Corps and opposed at the time to the insertion of another command there not under III MAF, he looked favorably at the establishment of a corps-sized contingency force under his control. At the April commanders' conference, he brought up the idea of the establishment of a corps-size "strike" force, consisting of three divisions, that would be "capable of moving anywhere in

South Vietnam to confront any strong enemy thrusts." The MACV commander cautioned that this idea was still in a conceptual stage and that none of the major command and control or logistic problems posed by such a force had as yet been addressed. Westmoreland was not even sure whether such a "strike force" would be based in Vietnam or on Okinawa, or possibly split between the two. In any event, during the next month or so, both the Westmoreland "strike force" and the U.S. Army Pacific plans continued to be discussed among senior U.S. commanders, but without any resolution. <sup>21</sup>

While the American commands prepared their various contingency plans, evidence began to mount of an enemy buildup in the eastern DMZ sector. In mid-May, U.S. reconnaissance aircraft observed increased truck traffic in southern North Vietnam moving south along Route 1. On 19 May, NVA units, in early morning assaults, attacked two ARVN outposts, Gio Linh and Con Thien, just south of the Demilitarized Zone. At both outposts, the South Vietnamese sustained heavy losses, 43 dead and 54 wounded at Gio Linh and 20 casualties at Con Thien. On the same date, a North Vietnamese surrendered to the ARVN and told his captors the 324B NVA Division had infiltrated through the DMZ into South Vietnam. Three days later, 22 May, the 2d Battalion, 2nd ARVN Regiment, in a search and destroy mission about eight kilometers north of Dong Ha, located a VC company, killing 35 and capturing three of the enemy, at a cost of seven ARVN dead. <sup>22</sup>

Based on additional intelligence that indicated the presence of a North Vietnamese force, possibly of regimental size, east and west of Dong Ha with the mission of taking that city and later attacking Quang Tri, MACV alerted III MAF on 28 May that the situation might require the movement of a Marine battalion to the Dong Ha Air Facility. In anticipation of the proposed operation, the Marine command designated Lieutenant Colonel "P. X." Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines at Da Nang for the move north. Kelley's battalion was already slated to join its parent regiment at Phu Bai and exchange TAORs with Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines which was scheduled to go to Da Nang. \*

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\*The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines moved to Da Nang from Phu Bai on 31 May and came under the operational control of the 9th Marines. See Chapter 6.



Marine Corps Photo A187155

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines arrive at Dong Ha by Marine KC 130 to begin Operation Reno. The battalion remained in the Dong Ha sector for 11 days but encountered few enemy.*

On 29 May, General Kyle, the 3d Marine Division commander, made liaison arrangements with the 1st ARVN Division and issued his operational order for the Dong Ha operation, codenamed Reno. The following day, he placed Kelley's battalion under the operational control of the 4th Marines and Marine KC-130s flew the 2nd Battalion's command group, two infantry companies, an attached artillery battery, and support troops to Dong Ha.<sup>23</sup>

From 30 May through 8 June, Kelley's battalion, in coordination with the ARVN, conducted a reconnaissance in force within an eight-kilometer radius of Dong Ha. During this 11-day period, the only enemy activity was an ambush of a six-man U.S. Air Force survey team from the Air Force radar detachment based at the Dong Ha Air Facility. The team

Marine Corps Photo A187948



*The U.S. radar site at the Dong Ha Air Facility pictured here was manned by U.S. Air Force personnel. It provided early warning of any air threat from the north.*



had departed the airfield in a jeep on the morning of 5 June after refusing an offer by Kelley to provide security. An air observer at 1500 that afternoon spotted a burning vehicle four miles south of Dong Ha and a Marine reaction force, arriving at the scene 20 minutes later, found all six men of the survey team shot to death. There was no sign of the VC. The ambushers apparently stopped the jeep with a grenade, killed each of the Air Force men with a bullet to the head, and then burned the vehicle.<sup>24</sup> Despite this incident, the 2d Battalion found little evidence of any major enemy unit in the Dong Ha sector. With the closeout of Operation Reno on 8 June, the Marine battalion departed Dong Ha. During the operation, the Marines killed three NVA with no casualties of their own. The enemy's intentions in the north still remained unclear.<sup>25</sup>

### *Politics and War*

Although South Vietnam was confronted with a possible buildup of enemy forces in the north, the political confrontation between the Struggle Forces and the central government during this period had a larger impact on the war effort in the two northern provinces. It particularly had an erosive effect upon the morale of the 1st ARVN Division which was responsible for the northern sector. Recruited locally, the troops and several commanders were personally loyal to the former commander of I Corps, General Thi, who had once commanded the division and made his home in Hue. Division Buddhist chaplains led the men in demonstrations against the government. Brigadier General Pham Xuan Nhuan, the division commander, refused to commit himself to either side and conveniently became ill or disappeared at strategic moments. After the burning of the U.S. Information Center Building in Hue on 1 June, the new I Corps commander, General Lam, briefly considered employing the division to put down the disorders in the city, but finally decided against such a move. The division had become politicized and was no longer a dependable fighting force.<sup>26</sup>

The 4th Marines maintained a "hands-off" policy, but attempted to keep open the lines of communication between Phu Bai and the LST ramp in Hue. In the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines conducted Operation Beaver from 1-7 June. The battalion met

only scattered resistance, but confiscated 25,000 pounds of rice. Hoping to get the 1st ARVN Division back into the war, Generals Walt and Lam scheduled a combined operation in this region.<sup>27</sup>

On 5 June, Colonel Sherman with members of his staff visited the 1st Division Headquarters at Hue to coordinate the operation, codenamed Florida, with the South Vietnamese. Based on intelligence that the 6th NVA Regimental Headquarters and the 800th VC Battalion were in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan area, the planners selected a 54-square-mile area sandwiched between the two rivers, the O Lau on the west and the Bo on the east. Two Marine battalions, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines already in the area, and Kelley's 2d Battalion, which was to be helilifted from Dong Ha to the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector, were to attack south from Route 1. Colonel Sherman was to move his forward headquarters into the objective area and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines was to provide artillery support. In a companion operation, Doan Ket, the 1st ARVN Division with two of its own battalions, a Vietnamese Marine Corps battalion, and two airborne battalions, was to secure the high ground to the south, the Marines rear to the north, and the Marine left flank to the east. Marine reconnaissance teams were to screen the area west of the Song O Lau.<sup>28</sup>

First on, then off, and then on again, the operation was beset with problems at the outset. The tense political situation caused the allies to postpone the operation, originally scheduled to begin on the 7th. Dissidents clogged the streets of Hue and Route 1 with Buddhist altars, blocking both military and civilian traffic. Brigadier General English, the 3d Marine Division assistant commander, and Colonel Sherman went to Hue on the 7th to discuss the situation with the South Vietnamese authorities. Because of General Lam's reluctance to delay the operation further, the allied commanders decided to test the situation on the following day by sending two Marine convoys down Route 1. One supply column, which had been stuck at the LST ramp in Hue, would try to travel south to Phu Bai. The second convoy consisting of Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, which had been in support of Kelley's battalion in Reno, would attempt to move from Dong Ha south to the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines CP in the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector. ARVN troops would escort both convoys.<sup>29</sup>

The test proved inconclusive. Although stopped



Marine Corps Photo 532569 (Capt Edwin W. Besch [Ret.])

*Col Donald W. Sherman (in center of group in right front of picture) responds to a newspaperman's question during Operation Florida. Buddhist demonstrators had halted a 4th Marines column by placing religious altars in the Marines' path.*

for a time south of Quang Tri, the artillery column from Dong Ha reached its destination on 8 June with few complications. The supply convoy from Hue ran into more difficulty. More than 2,000 statues and altars were strewn along Route 1 between Hue and the Marine base. At one point when the Marine vehicles could not move, ARVN soldiers demolished a concrete culvert to make a by-pass. A "friendly monk" then guided the trucks "around the altars . . . and there was no unpleasant incident." The convoy arrived at Phu Bai at 2100 that evening. The allied commanders, nevertheless, elected to go with the operation on 9 June.<sup>30</sup>

Again, on the 9th, Buddhist roadblocks delayed the beginning of the operation. Although both infantry battalions supported by two 105mm batteries were already in the Florida operating area, the 4th Marines command group, the artillery command group, and a 155mm battery were to move by convoy along Route 1 from Phu Bai into the Co Bi Thanh Tan sector. The operation was scheduled to start at 0730, but Buddhist altars on a bridge halted the Marine column from Phu Bai. Buddhist and student demonstrators refused to remove the items and

the ARVN escort was apparently under orders not to disturb the religious artifacts. At 1100, after failing to resolve the impasse with the dissidents, Colonel Sherman decided to return to Phu Bai and forego the support of the medium artillery battery for the operation.\* MAG-16 helicopters lifted the two Marine command groups from the Phu Bai Airfield into the operational area.<sup>31</sup>

Operation Florida finally got underway at 1630 on 9 June. As could be expected with the fits and starts that characterized the beginning of the operation, any enemy unit in the area had long left. The Marines and the South Vietnamese ended Florida/Doan Ket on 12 June with only minimal military results. At a cost of four wounded because of mines and booby traps, the two Marine battalions in Florida accounted for 15 VC dead. Yet there was

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\*Captain Edwin W. Besch, who at the time of Florida commanded Headquarters Company, 4th Marines, remembered that later the altars "were smashed by Vietnamese Marines." Capt Edwin W. Besch, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12 Jun 78 (Vietnam Comment File).

another aspect to the operation that Colonel Sherman pointed out:

It is considered that from the ARVN standpoint, the primary operation was political in nature and was achieved, that objective being the displacement of the 1st ARVN Division out of the city of Hue and into the field.<sup>32</sup>

The denouement of the political situation soon followed. With the arrival of additional police at Hue and the massing of Vietnamese Marines and airborne troops at Phu Bai, the government was about to make its move. On 14 June, General Lam told the American command that he planned to go into Hue, "with whatever force required, arrest the leaders of the Struggle Group, clear the streets of the Buddhist altars, and reestablish government control."<sup>33</sup> Although the dissident leaders called for demonstrations and for South Vietnamese troops to stop fighting, only two battalions of the 1st Division heeded the call. On 17 June the battalions left an ARVN operation and headed for Hue, but stopped before reaching their destination after being strafed by Vietnamese aircraft. The following day, a South Vietnamese airborne brigade and a two-battalion Vietnamese Marine task force entered the city and occupied key positions. At the same time, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff replaced the equivocating General Nhuan as commander of the 1st Division with the airborne commander, Colonel Ngo Quang Truong. By morning on the 19th, Hue was quiet.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the aborted mutiny of the two battalions, the 1st Division recovered remarkably fast from its embroilment with the "Struggle Movement." Shortly after the breakup of the dissident group in Hue, the division, with two of its own battalions together with two South Vietnamese Marine battalions and supported by its armored troops and U.S. Marine air, defeated the *808th NVA Battalion*. Apparently emboldened by the political crisis, the enemy unit, one of the battalions of the *6th NVA Regiment*, had entered the Quang Tri coastal plain from its mountainous base area on a rice-gathering mission and was willing to take on the South Vietnamese in a stand-up fight. In a two-day engagement, lasting from 21-23 June, seven kilometers northeast of Quang Tri City, the ARVN division killed 312 of the enemy while sustaining casualties of 37 killed and 104 wounded. In addition, the South Vietnamese captured 40 NVA troops including one company com-

mander. The 1st Division had returned to the war with a vengeance.<sup>35</sup>

### *Heavy Fighting in Thua Thien Province*

In Thua Thien Province, following Operation Florida, the 4th Marines made some adjustments in its units. As directed by the 3d Division, Colonel Sherman ordered Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines out of the Co Bi Thanh Tan area and back to Phu Bai where it took over the TAOR formerly manned by Bell's 1st Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines remained responsible for the Phu Bai Vital Area, while Vale's 3d Battalion continued with Operation Athens, south of the TAOR, against very light enemy resistance until 25 June. After its participation in Operation Florida, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, on 17 June, began Operation Dodge, five miles north of the base. During the operation which lasted until 23 June, the battalion encountered few enemy, but confiscated 4,000 pounds of rice.<sup>36</sup>

During this period, a small 4th Marines force made a daring, if uneventful, sortie into the abandoned A Shau Special Forces Camp. After the fall of the camp in March, the *95th NVA Regiment* apparently returned to its base area in Laos without any major attempt to clean up the battlefield. In May, a Special Forces patrol entered the camp to recover the allied dead left behind during the evacuation. Much to the patrol's surprise none of the bodies had been disturbed or boobytrapped and a great deal of ammunition and weapons lay strewn around the camp. Upon the return of the Special Forces detachment with the bodies, it reported its findings to higher headquarters.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the Special Forces' report, General Walt, on 1 June, decided to send a Marine demolitions team later in the month into the former camp to destroy the ammunition. He ordered General Kyle to come up with a plan.<sup>38</sup> On 10 June, the 3d Marine Division reported back to III MAF with a tentative concept of operations. It called for a ground force of some 70 Marines, to include a reinforced rifle platoon, demolition personnel, and an engineer detachment, supported by eight to 10 CH-46 helicopters and fixed-wing close air support. General Kyle suggested that it might be better to accomplish the destruction mission with air strikes rather than

risk a ground operation.<sup>39</sup> III MAF, nevertheless, insisted on the ground force, and the division, in turn, gave the assignment to the 4th Marines.<sup>40</sup>

Working with the 3d Division concept, Colonel Sherman's staff developed the plans for the operation, codenamed Turner. A platoon from Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, reinforced with a machine gun team, a forward air control team, and demolitions and engineer personnel, was to carry out the mission. With the attack force divided into two groups, one element was to destroy the ammunition within the compound while the second exploded two pallets of small arms ammunition that had been airdropped southwest of the camp during the March fighting. The remaining platoons of Company I would stay at Phu Bai as a reserve reaction force.<sup>41</sup>

After extended rehearsals and one or two postponements, Operation Turner went off smoothly. On 23 June, under cover of Marine fixed-wing aircraft and armed Hueys from VMO-2, six CH-46s from HMM-164 lifted the attack force into A Shau. Arriving at their destination prior to 0700, both groups completed their missions and were once more airborne within two hours. The Marines were back at Phu Bai by 0915, having seen no sign of any enemy force in the objective area.<sup>42</sup>

If the 95th NVA had become a phantom regiment, the allies had little difficulty in locating the battalions of the 6th NVA which had moved into the coastal region of southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. As a result of their contact with the 808th Battalion in Lam Son-283 north of Quang Tri City, the South Vietnamese learned that the remaining two battalions of the enemy regiment, the 806th and 812th, were in Quang Dien District in Thua Thien. On 23 June, an ARVN patrol in the district, operating just north of the O Lau River ran into a strong enemy force and sustained heavy casualties. After looking at the available intelligence, U.S. advisors to the 1st Division and the 4th Marines staff believed that both the 806th and 812th had entered the old Operation Oregon\* area and were deployed along Route 597.<sup>43</sup>

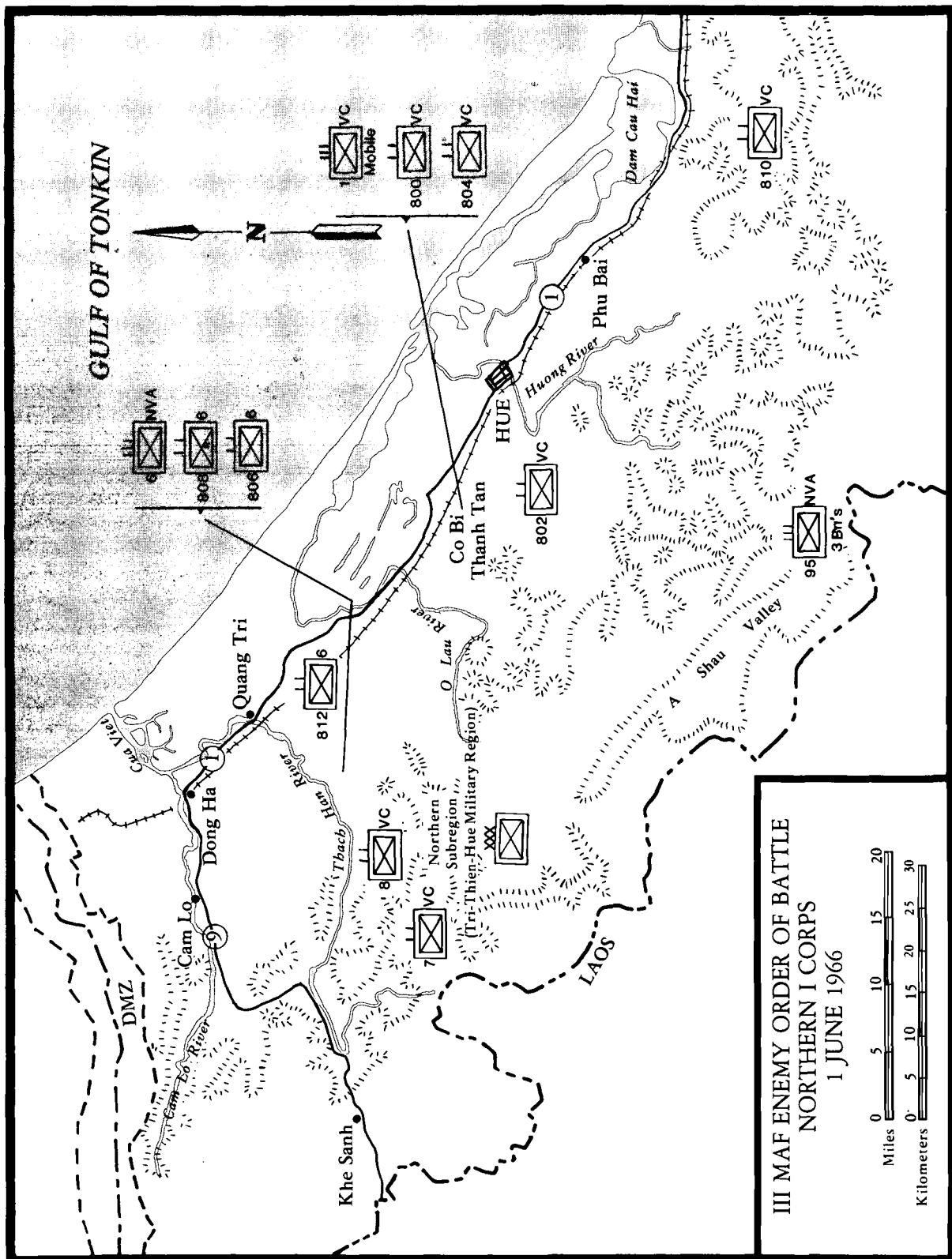
Acting on this information, Colonel Sherman and his staff on 24 June visited the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters at Hue where they worked out a concept for a combined operation. Quickly approved by

the various echelons of command, the resulting plan called for the helilift of two Marine battalions into an area of operations bounded by the O Lau River on the north and west, and Route 1 to the south. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines would land in the northwest sector and attack along Route 597 toward blocking positions established by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, approximately 6,000 meters to the southeast. The 4th Marines command group together with the artillery battalion, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, and other support forces would move by road convoy along Route 1 into the southern portion of the operational area, just north of Phong Dien. Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines was the regimental reserve for the operation and the 3d Battalion remained ready to provide additional companies if needed. The 1st ARVN Division in the companion operation, Lam Son-284, was to establish blocking positions to the north of the Marine operation, across the O Lau River. A Navy destroyer stood offshore to provide naval gunfire while the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would furnish both fixed-wing and helicopter air support.<sup>44</sup>

By 0730 on the morning of 25 June, the operation, codenamed Jay, was ready to begin. Colonel Sherman had opened his forward CP in the objective area and the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines artillery, consisting of a 105mm battery and a 155mm battery, was in place. To the north, two ARVN battalions were in position across the O Lau. At 0800, under clear skies, the first wave of 19 CH-46s from MAG-16, carrying the lead elements of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, started their descent into Landing Zone Raven, approximately 8,000 meters north of the 4th Marines' command post. After some delay, the Marine helicopters completed the lift of the remainder of Kelley's battalion without incident at 0945. One-half hour later, the battalion crossed its line of departure with Company F on the north side of Route 597, Company H on the south of the road, and the command group and Company E following in trace.

The terrain in the objective area consisted of dry paddy land interspersed with several streams and lagoons. Despite the relatively flat, open ground in the region, paddy dikes and thick stands of bamboo, hedgerows, and scrub growth, as well as extensive tree lines surrounding the hamlets, provided excellent cover and concealment for any defending enemy force.

\*See Chapter 4 for a description of Operation Oregon.



Kelley's battalion, nevertheless, reached its first objective, Phase Line Bravo, some 2,000 meters southeast of LZ Raven, without encountering any opposition. As the Marines renewed their advance, however, the enemy opened up with heavy small arms fire from Ap Chinh An, the same fortified hamlet that had caused such frustration for the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines earlier in Operation Oregon. The Marine attack soon stalled. Lieutenant Colonel Kelley then ordered his Company H to swerve north in order to flank the enemy and at the same time asked for naval gunfire, artillery, and air support. Despite the employment of the supporting arms, the Marine battalion still was unable to penetrate the enemy defenses.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, meanwhile, had arrived at 1100 in its landing zone, LZ Shrike, approximately 9,000 meters southeast from LZ Raven. As planned, the battalion then established its blocking positions at Phase Line Delta, some 3,500 meters northwest of its LZ. At 1420, Colonel Sherman ordered Hanifin to move his battalion into new positions at Phase Line Golf, another 1,500 meters to the northwest to reinforce Kelley's battalion. As the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines advanced with Company G on the north side of Route 597 and Company H on the south, the Marines met strong enemy forces in the hamlet of My Phu. While still taking fire from its front, Company H deployed to rescue the crew of a downed

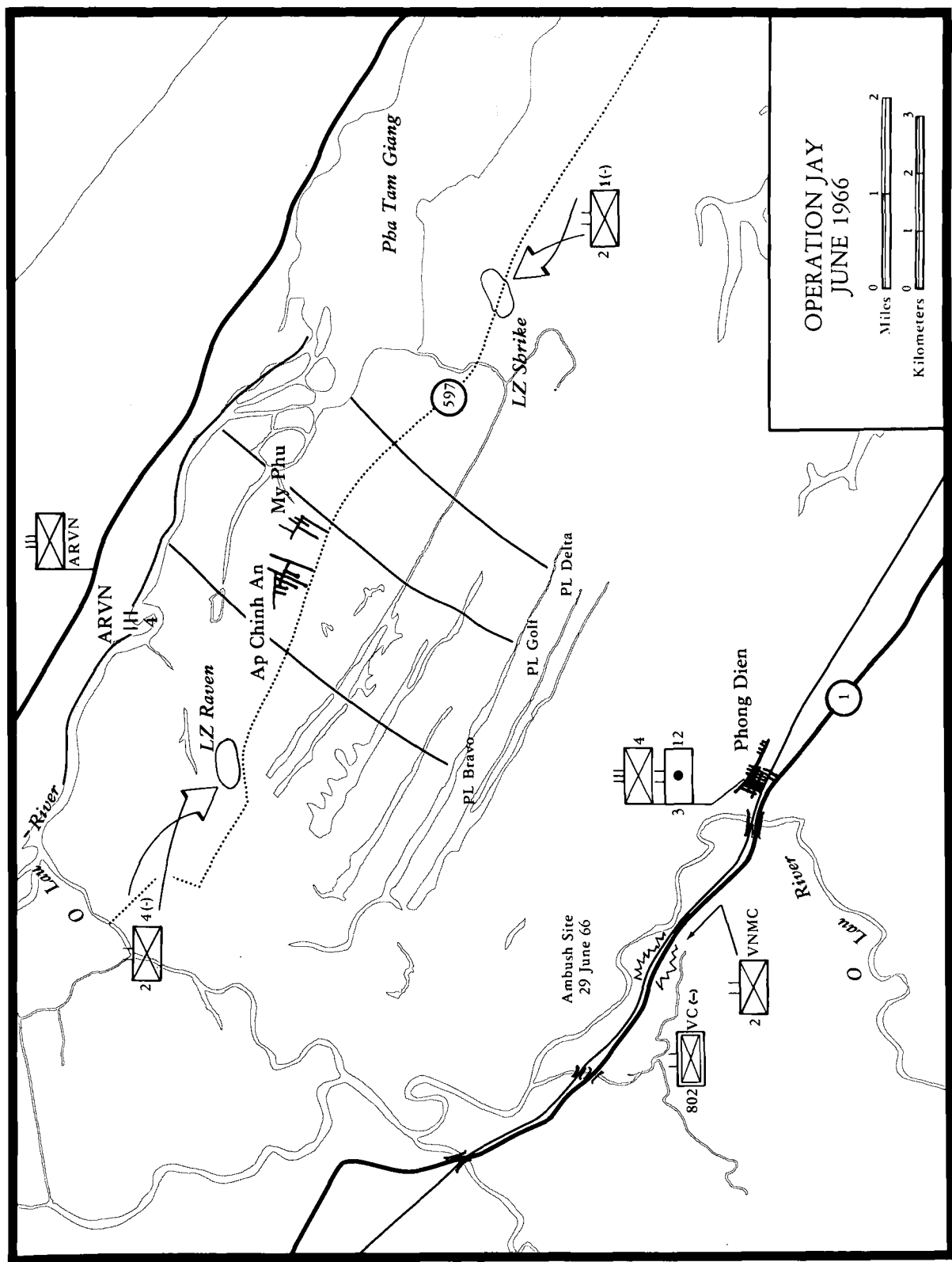
Marine helicopter from HMM-161 which had crashed 1,000 meters south of the hamlet. Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin then ordered his Company F to reinforce Company G in the attack on My Phu. After accomplishing its rescue mission, Company H then maneuvered to link up with Kelley's battalion.

Through the night and early morning hours of 25-26 June, both battalions continued to encounter heavy resistance in the two hamlets. With two of his companies engaged in Ap Chinh An, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley ordered his Company E to advance southeast and attempt to reach Hanifin's battalion. Although the Marines of Company E could see the men of Company H of the 1st Marines battalion, they were unable to break through the enemy lines to make physical contact. From well dug-in positions in both hamlets, the enemy defenders, employing 60mm, 80mm, and 81mm mortars, heavy automatic and small arms weapons, fought tenaciously. At 2100, the NVA made a strong counterattack against Company H, 4th Marines, south of Ap Chinh An, but with the assistance of supporting arms the Marines repulsed the assault. Despite problems with coordination because of the proximity of the two Marine battalions to one another, Marine aircraft and artillery reinforced by the guns of the destroyer *Davis* (DD 957) repeatedly bombarded the enemy positions in the two hamlets. The *Davis* alone fired more than 530 rounds on the 25th. Believing they had the enemy force hemmed in between them, the

*Marines unload supplies from a helicopter during Operation Jay in June 1966. In heavy fighting, the 4th Marines engaged three enemy battalions in northeastern Thua Thien Province.*

Marine Corps Photo A187772





two Marine battalions waited for daylight before renewing their attacks on Ap Chinh An and My Phu.<sup>45</sup>

There were two other separate but related actions on the night of 25-26 June. At the request of the U.S. sector advisor, Colonel Sherman sent his reserve force, Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, together with a section of Ontos to reinforce a South Vietnamese Popular Force platoon some 5,000 meters northwest of the 4th Marines CP. As they reached the objective areas, the Marines received some scattered shots and returned the fire. The VC force quickly disengaged, leaving eight dead behind.<sup>46</sup> Further north, a strong NVA force, suspected to be from the *806th Battalion*, assaulted the two ARVN battalions in Lam Son-284. U.S. supporting arms broke up the attack. According to a Marine report, "two large secondary explosions were observed and the VC appeared to be running in confusion."<sup>47</sup>

On the morning of 26 June, the 4th Marines made its preparations for the final assault on Ap Chinh An and My Phu. Colonel Sherman reinforced Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion at 0655 with another company, Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. After a preliminary artillery and air bombardment, the two battalions launched their attacks. Although the Marines met resistance in both hamlets, it was soon apparent that the bulk of the enemy forces had pulled out during the night, leaving behind a rear guard to hamper the progress of the Marines. With the assistance of supporting arms, the Marine infantry slowly but surely cleared out the remaining enemy.

The most serious incident occurred when a misdirected Marine 105mm shell fell on a 2d Battalion, 4th Marines company CP, killing one Marine and wounding three others.<sup>48</sup> At 1600, Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, linked up with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Kelley relinquished operational control of the company to Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin. By nightfall, the Marine battalions had captured the two hamlets.

Through 28 June, the two Marine battalions continued with the mop-up in their respective sectors. In My Phu, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, "swept and reswept . . . with only civilians and hidden bodies remaining in the objective area."<sup>49</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Kelley's battalion in Ap Chien An also came across "some bodies and equipment . . . in

various hiding places."<sup>50</sup> Both the Marines and the NVA had sustained heavy losses during the fighting. From 25-28 June, the two Marine battalions took casualties of 23 dead and 58 wounded, with all but two of the deaths and seven of the injuries having occurred in the initial fighting of 25 June. The Marines recovered 82 bodies of the enemy and estimated killing 200 more.<sup>51</sup>

On 28 June, Colonel Sherman received permission to make Jay a one-battalion operation. He directed that Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's battalion close out its portion of the operation and that the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines take over the entire sector in the Ap Chien An-My Phu village complex.<sup>52</sup> Although on the night of the 28th the regiment received intelligence that a VC force was about to attack the command post, the attack never materialized and the Marines continued with their plans to reduce the scope of the operation.<sup>53</sup> On the morning of the 29th, Lieutenant Colonel Kelley assumed control of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines sector while the latter unit prepared to depart for the regimental CP. Company E, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines reverted to the operational control of its parent battalion and Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines returned to the 4th Marines CP as part of the regimental reserve. In the artillery area, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines made its preparations to leave for Phu Bai. The Marine artillerymen had staged their non-essential vehicles for departure when shortly after 0830:

The sounds of automatic small arms and mortar firing were heard in the CP. Two large columns of smoke [rose] . . . in the air. The Battalion S-3 immediately ordered action rear on all weapons . . . in anticipation of some fire missions.<sup>54</sup>

The allied intelligence of the movement of an enemy battalion into the Jay area of operations had not been entirely a false alarm. On the night and early morning hours of 28-29 June, the *802d VC Battalion* departed its base area in the mountains southwest of the Marine operating area and at 0200 reached its destination on Route 1, some 2,500 meters northwest of the 4th Marines CP. Its target, however, was not the Marines' CP, but rather a South Vietnamese Marine truck convoy, due to pass by later in the morning. Armed with 75mm and 57mm recoilless rifles, 60mm mortars, and automatic weapons, the VC battalion deployed along both sides of the road and waited.<sup>55</sup>

The South Vietnamese convoy of 28 trucks carry-



ing the 2d Battalion, Vietnamese Marine Corps left Hue City at 0730. Loaded on board the vehicles by company, the 1st Company was at the head of the column; the 3d Company, H&S Company, and the command group were in the center; and the 2d and 4th Companies brought up the rear. Although there had not been an ambush along this sector of Highway 1 for more than 10 months, the South Vietnamese troops faced outward and automatic weapons on the trucks were at the ready. The battalion commander provided for planned artillery coverage along the route of march and kept an artillery forward observer with him. For added insurance, a small South Vietnamese spotter plane flew overhead. In the event of an ambush, the battalion was "to dismount, form up by units, and stand and fight as . . . directed."<sup>56</sup>

About 0830, the Vietnamese truck convoy crossed the bridge over the O Lau River at Phong Dien and continued north. As the first echelon drove past an open 3,000-meter area, enemy gunners on the west side of the road opened up at a range of 200 meters "with a heavy volume of accurate mortar and recoilless rifle fire" at the center of the convoy. The enemy infantry then joined in with machine gun and rifle bursts directed along the entire length of the column. Ten of the trucks were hit; three were completely destroyed. The battalion commander halted the convoy and ordered his troops to dismount. Marine Captain Thomas E. Campbell, the senior U.S. advisor to the 2d Battalion, remembered that despite heavy casualties the Vietnamese Marines accomplished this in good order and deployed along the road, returning the enemy fire.<sup>57</sup>

The side of the road offered very little cover and the Marines continued to take casualties. Campbell recalled that they could see through the thin stand of trees to the west of the highway the "backblasts from the recoilless weapons along the crest of the low rolling hills," and enemy troops maneuvering forward. The Marine battalion commander ordered his companies to move back to the relative security of the railroad tracks which paralleled the highway, some 75 meters to the east. As the Marines, led by the H&S Company and command group, together with the 2d and 4th Companies, approached the railroad cut they were met with a "withering volume of small arms fire and hand grenades." Up to this point, all of the enemy activity had been from west of the highway and the two VC companies east of the road

had allowed the Marines to come within 10 yards of their positions before opening fire. The Vietnamese Marine battalion commander was seriously wounded and "virtually the entire command group was killed outright or incapacitated by wounds." Some 15-20 Marines from the H&S Company reached the railroad cut but were mowed down by machine gun fire "directed down the railroad tracks and into their left flank." The enemy had succeeded in dividing the Marine battalion into two, one group centered around the 2d and 4th Companies together with the remnants of the H&S Company, and the second group consisting of the 1st and 3d Companies, some 500 yards away. Less than six minutes had elapsed since the ambush had been triggered.<sup>58</sup>

The Marines were relegated to maintaining two perimeters, separated by open ground and not mutually supporting. Fortunately for the embattled troops, a U.S. Army spotter plane arrived overhead. The U.S. Marine advisors on the ground made radio contact with the pilot and called for assistance. At this point, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, which had been monitoring the U.S. Marine advisor radio net, broke in and offered its services. The first artillery shells fell into the impact area at 0846. About this time a U.S. Air Force FAC(A) aircraft was on the scene and began to direct Marine F-4s, which had been circling overhead, into strikes on the enemy positions.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly afterward, both the 4th Marines and the ARVN 1st Division began preparations to send reinforcements to assist the beleaguered South Vietnamese Marine battalion. At 0915, Colonel Sherman, together with members of his staff and one of his company commanders, made an aerial reconnaissance of the ambush site and on his return ordered his reserve company accompanied by an Ontos platoon into the area. The ARVN division, which had been conducting a new operation, Lam Son-285, a few miles north of the ambush, sent two infantry battalions reinforced by an APC troop and tank company.<sup>60</sup>

At the ambush site, once the American aircraft began their strikes, the *802d Battalion* lost interest in the South Vietnamese Marines and concentrated on making good its escape. To the east of the railroad, the enemy troops had the advantage of thick cover and were able to get out relatively unscathed. To the west of Highway 1, however, the VC had to cross largely open ground before they



Marine Corps Photo 532567 (Capt Edwin W. Besch [Ret.])  
*An ARVN M8 armored car stands guard at 4th Marines CP during Operation Jay while Marines in background inspect weapons captured from the 802d VC Main Force Battalion. The 802d had ambushed a Vietnamese Marine battalion, but in turn was caught in the open by Marine air and ground forces together with an ARVN airborne battalion.*

could reach the relative security of the hills. Marine artillery and air enjoyed a field day while the Ontos platoon, which arrived in the area shortly after 0950, "obliterated a VC squad on a ridgeline with a single 106mm salvo."<sup>61</sup>

Within one and one-half to three hours after the ambush, two Marine companies, I and L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; the Ontos platoon; and the 1st ARVN Division units, reinforced by an airborne battalion, had converged on the objective area and cut off the retreat of those enemy forces still west of the highway. Between them, the allies killed more than 185 of the enemy and captured nine prisoners. They also recovered 39 individual and eight crew-served weapons. One Marine recalled that "General Walt directed his own helicopter to land and capture a 75mm recoilless rifle abandoned by retreating VC."<sup>62</sup>

The victory over the 802d had not come cheaply. The 2d Vietnamese Marine Battalion sustained casualties of 42 killed, including the battalion commander who died of his wounds, and 95 wounded. Captain Campbell, who had also been wounded in the action, later wrote that the reasons that the battalion had not suffered even more grievous losses were the:

... maintenance of unit integrity, the skillful maneuvering of these companies by their commanders, and the outright doggedness, determination, and raw courage of individual Marines.<sup>63</sup>

Operation Jay continued for a few more days, but the fighting was over. The two Marine companies and the Ontos platoon, which participated in the action of the 29th in support of the Vietnamese Marine battalion, returned to the 4th Marines CP the following morning. On the 30th, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d battalion also departed for Phu Bai. The following day, Colonel Sherman closed his CP in the Jay operation and, on 2 July, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines completed its mop up and civic action activities in the Ap Chien An and My Phu complex. During the eight-day operation, the Marines and ARVN, supported by Marine air and artillery, and naval gunfire, smashed three enemy battalions, the 802d, 806th, and 812th. Marine estimates of the enemy dead in both Jay and in the reaction to the Vietnamese Marine ambush, not including those killed by the ARVN, were more than 475. Allied intelligence later learned that the 812th literally ceased to exist, with its remaining personnel distributed among three other battalions.<sup>64</sup>

Following Jay, the Marines also made an attempt to finish off the 802d Battalion, which allied intelligence believed had returned to its base area south of the old Florida area after the ambush on 29 June. Colonel Sherman assigned the operation to his 3d Battalion, which after completing Operation Athens exchanged TAORs with the 1st Battalion and had become the regimental reserve. The plan was for the Marine battalion, supported by air and artillery, to exploit a B-52 strike on the suspected enemy base camp. As planned, the 3d Battalion began the operation, codenamed Holt, on 2 July, but enjoyed meager results. For the next few days through the end of the operation on 6 July, the Marines killed seven of the enemy at the cost of one wounded Marine. The battalion had most of its difficulty with the dense foliage, which often limited its progress to a pace of 50-100 yards per hour. As one Marine officer observed, "Holt was not particularly inspiring," but it gave the Marines a taste of jungle warfare that they were soon to encounter farther north.<sup>65</sup>

#### *Further Reconnaissance in the North*

While the 4th Marines engaged the units of the 6th NVA Regiment in northern Thua Thien Pro-

vince, the 1st ARVN Division reported that new large NVA units had infiltrated Quang Tri Province through the DMZ region. Despite the lack of contact that the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had during Operation Reno earlier in the month, III MAF intelligence officers observed in their June report that these reports of an enemy buildup in the DMZ, "while still unconfirmed, have not been discounted."<sup>66</sup>

At MACV Headquarters, General Westmoreland, who believed that the enemy wanted to take advantage of the disruptions caused by the political crisis, warned his subordinate commanders that the NVA soon might mount an offensive either in the Central Highlands or through the DMZ. The MACV commander was convinced that the *NVA 324B Division* had moved into Quang Tri Province and that the "NVA had gone to great lengths to establish supply areas and structural facilities in the DMZ area and adjacent to it."<sup>67</sup> Yet, as Westmoreland later explained to *New Yorker* correspondent Robert Shaplen:

I didn't want to react too quickly, and I wanted to be sure we had enough intelligence to guide us. At the time, though I had nearly two hundred and fifty thousand troops in the country, I was still operating on a shoestring, maneuvering battalions all over the place. I had to have more intelligence on what was going on up north, and there was no better way to get it than by sending in reconnaissance elements in force.<sup>68</sup>

The responsibility for the execution of the reconnaissance mission, of course, lay with III MAF. Since the beginning of the month, General Walt had completed contingency plans to reinforce the 1st ARVN Division and continued to work with General Lam on the possibility of combined operations with the South Vietnamese in Quang Tri Province. Following extensive sightings of enemy forces in the Cam Lo sector and, on 18 June, a mortar attack on the ARVN Cam Lo outpost, some eight miles west of Dong Ha on Route 9, the Marine command decided to begin its reconnaissance of the DMZ region.<sup>69</sup>

At Phu Bai, the 4th Marines had expanded their reconnaissance capability. Since March, Reconnaissance Group Bravo at Phu Bai, structured around Company B, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, had been reinforced by a platoon from Company A and the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. Major Dwain A. Colby, the commanding officer of the Force Reconnaissance Company, as the senior of-



Marine Corps Photo A707701 (Stephen Iannece)  
*The bridge spans the Ben Hai River, which divided the two Vietnams. The flag of North Vietnam can be seen on the far shore while the flag of South Vietnam is seen on the near bank.*

ficer, assumed command of Recon Group Bravo. By the end of May, the 4th Marines reconnaissance zones had grown from three to six, extending from southern Thua Thien to southern Quang Tri.<sup>70</sup> With the decision to begin an extended reconnaissance in the DMZ sector, Colonel Sherman ordered the formation of Task Unit Charlie, with Colby in command, and consisting of: two reconnaissance platoons, one from the Force Reconnaissance Company and the other from Company A; Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines; and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, reinforced by two 155mm howitzers.<sup>71</sup>

On 22 June, Task Unit Charlie moved from Phu Bai to Dong Ha and Cam Lo. The Marine artillery established firing positions at the latter base, while Company E, reinforced by an infantry platoon already at Dong Ha from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, provided security for both sites. Covered by the artillery, the reconnaissance Marines were to determine "the size, designation, and equipment" of enemy units in the Cam Lo area.<sup>72</sup>

III MAF, which still had its reservations about the existence of a large enemy force in the DMZ sector, was soon to have all of its doubts removed. On 28 June, the NVA mortared the Cam Lo base, which resulted in two dead and five wounded, and as Major Colby recollected, "a personal visit by Major General Kyle." More significant, every reconnaissance insertion, according to Colby:

... encountered armed, uniformed groups and no patrol was able to stay in the field for more than a few hours, many for only a few minutes. Reports of this activity brought General Walt to the scene (probably to relieve the incompetent that couldn't keep his patrols out). But after talking to the reconnaissance teams, one of which was still in its jungle garb, having been extracted under fire minutes before General Walt's arrival, he apparently decided there was something to the rumor that the NVA was crossing the DMZ.<sup>73</sup>

By the end of the month, Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin opened the CP of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Dong Ha and a new phase of the war was about to begin.

## CHAPTER 10

# Marines Turn North, Operation Hastings

*Finding the Enemy—Reactivation of Task Force Delta and Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ,  
12-25 July 1966—Hastings Comes to an End, 26 July-3 August 1966*

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### *Finding the Enemy*

The reconnaissance phase of the operation in the north was to last a couple more weeks. With the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Hanifin's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines at Dong Ha, he assumed operational control of the Dong Ha-Cam Lo sector while Major Colby retained responsibility for the reconnaissance activity. Colby recalled that the resulting command relations were delicate in that Hanifin's mission was to support the reconnaissance effort, without actual control over it. The reconnaissance commander credited both Hanifin and himself with "A great

deal of tact and self-control . . . to make this relationship function."<sup>1</sup>

Despite reinforcement by the infantry and additional reconnaissance units as well as a change in designation from Task Unit Charlie to Detachment A, Recon Group Bravo in early July, little had changed for Colby's reconnaissance Marines. They continued to observe and encounter, in increasing numbers, uniformed regulars of the North Vietnamese Army. On 4 July, a patrol, led by First Lieutenant Theard J. Terrebone, Jr., moved into the area 16 miles west of Dong Ha where a 700 foot "sort of toothpick-type mountain stuck out in the middle of an open area," with "sheer cliff straight up and down," and known as the Rockpile, dominates the

*A Marine helicopter makes a one-wheeled landing on top of the Rockpile in the DMZ sector. The Rockpile, a 700-foot mountain dominating the nearby landscape, was to become a familiar terrain feature to Marines in the "DMZ War."*

Marine Corps Photo A187836





Marine Corps Photo A332831 (Maj Theard J. Terrebonne, Jr.)

*Marines of 3d Platoon, Company A, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, led by 1stLt Theard J. Terrebonne, Jr., pose at Dong Ha after a patrol extraction in early July. During this period, 14 out of 18 patrols in the DMZ sector had to be withdrawn because of enemy contact.*

landscape.<sup>2</sup> During the 24-hour period the patrol remained in the vicinity of the Rockpile, the Marines observed several well-camouflaged enemy firing positions including trench lines, mortar pits, and fighting holes. After calling an artillery fire mission on some nearby enemy forces, the patrol returned to its base area. For the next 10 days, the Marines continued their reconnaissance effort, but of the 18 patrols conducted during this period, 14 had to be withdrawn because of enemy contact. The reconnaissance Marines sighted more than 300 North Vietnamese troops.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, South Vietnamese Army units operating in the same region obtained more evidence about the movement of North Vietnamese regulars across the border. On 6 July, 1st ARVN Division troops captured a NVA soldier near the Rockpile. He identified his unit as part of the *5th Battalion, 812th Regiment* of the *324B Division* and stated that the other regiments of the division, the *90th* and the *803d*, also had entered South Vietnam.

Three days later, a lieutenant from the *812th Regiment* surrendered in the same area. He provided detailed intelligence on the positions and designations of the *324B Division*, and declared that the mission of the North Vietnamese division was to "liberate" Quang Tri Province. The enemy lieutenant further explained that other NVA and VC units, both in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, were to block any ARVN reinforcements attempting to move north.<sup>4</sup>

This information finally convinced the senior Marine commanders that the NVA had indeed advanced into South Vietnam through the DMZ. General Kyle recommended to Walt that the Marines "move troops north to try to get them [the North Vietnamese] out of there and drive them back." Walt agreed and so advised General Westmoreland, who needed little persuasion.<sup>5</sup>

There followed a brief two to three days of hasty consultation and planning. On 11 July, Brigadier General Lowell E. English, the 3d Marine Division



Marine Corps Photo A421324

*South Vietnamese airborne troopers deploy after debarking from a Marine CH-46 helicopter to begin Operation Lam Son-289. Lam Son-289 was the South Vietnamese counterpart operation to Hastings.*

ADC, conferred at Hue with General Truong, the CG, 1st ARVN Division, and Colonel Sherman of the 4th Marines about combined plans for combating the enemy threat in the north. Meeting at the 1st ARVN Division Headquarters, the three officers agreed on a general concept of operations. A Marine task force was to move into the area south of the DMZ to participate in Operation Hastings, the codename given on 7 July to the Marine reconnaissance in northern Quang Tri. ARVN forces were to engage in a counterpart operation, Lam Son-289, south of the Marines. The original plan called for a D-Day of 13 July for the new phase of Hastings.<sup>6</sup>

General Kyle agreed to the need for an expanded operation and authorized Colonel Sherman to establish a forward headquarters at Dong Ha. The 3d Marine Division commander, however, had reservations about the D-Day date. He believed that more detailed planning was required, especially in relation to the logistic implications, before the second phase of Hastings could begin.<sup>7</sup>

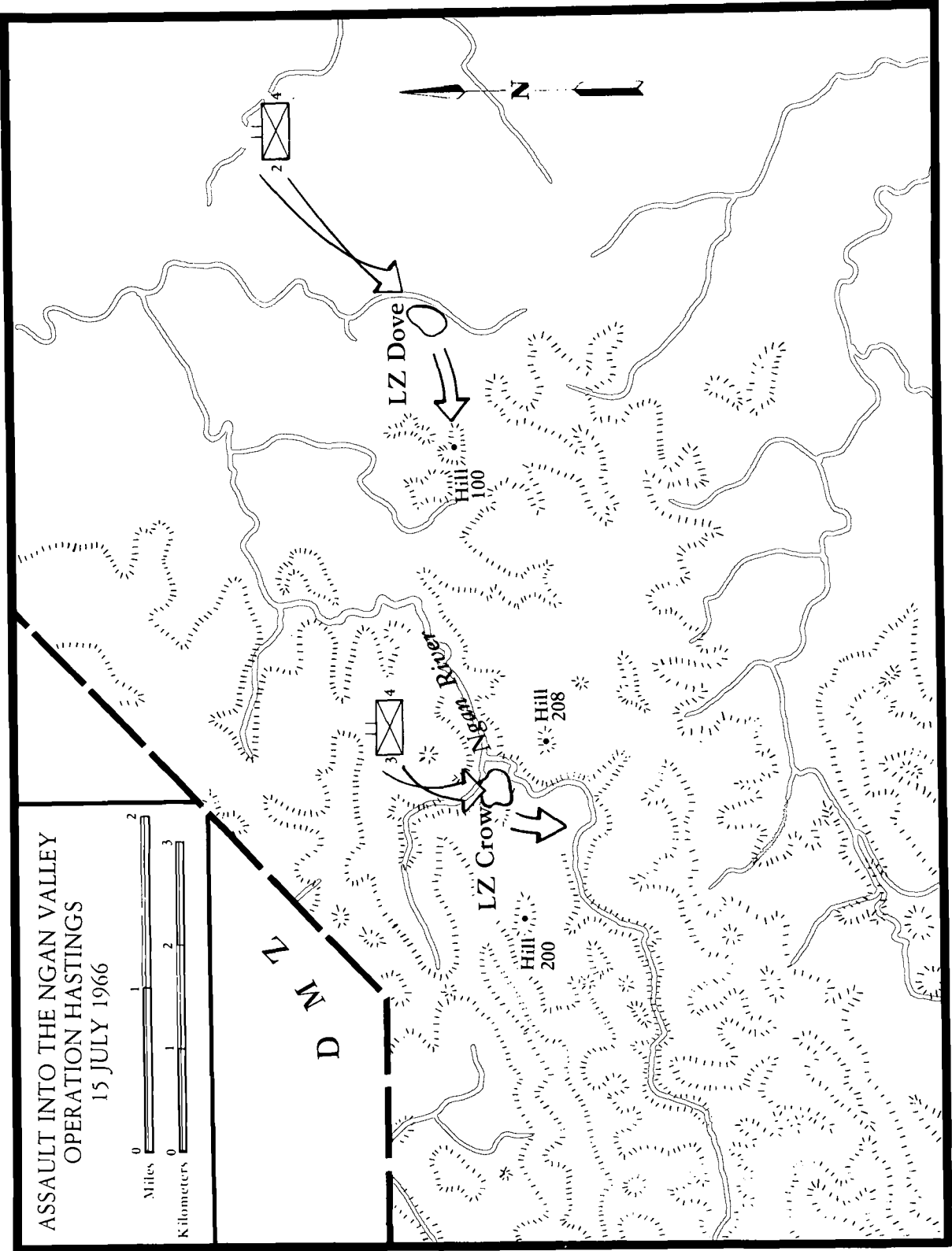
In Saigon, during the interim, General Westmoreland, on 11 July, met with General Cao

Van Vien of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. According to Westmoreland, he told Vien that they knew that the 324B Division was moving south, but not its destination. The MACV commander suggested that he and Vien meet with their respective subordinate field commanders. On 12 July, Westmoreland and Vien flew to Da Nang where they visited with Generals Lam and Walt. The four generals then went to Hue, discussed the situation with General Truong, and later attended a briefing at Dong Ha. Convinced that the enemy had moved in force across the DMZ into northern Quang Tri, Westmoreland directed Walt to move up to a division to Quang Tri. He told the III MAF commander that he would make the necessary arrangements with CinCPac to have the Seventh Fleet SLF available for the operation, while Vien promised Lam the use of five battalions of the South Vietnamese general reserve. They reassured Walt and Lam that III MAF and I Corps would have the necessary resources for the successful execution of an allied counterstroke in the north.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Reactivation of Task Force Delta and Heavy Fighting Along the DMZ, 12-25 July*

On the afternoon of 12 July, General Kyle ordered the reactivation of Task Force Delta at 0800 the next morning and once more selected his ADC, General English, as its commander. Colonel Sherman's 4th Marines Headquarters provided the nucleus for the staff, while Sherman himself became Chief of Staff. In addition to the 4th Marines Headquarters, Task Force Delta consisted of four infantry battalions, 2/1, 1/3, 2/4, and 3/4; one artillery battalion, 3/12; and other supporting forces. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was to furnish both fixed-wing and helicopter support. VMGR-152's KC-130s flew the first elements of English's command to the Dong Ha airstrip, and on 14 July, General English established his command post near Cam Lo, seven miles west of Dong Ha and south of the Cam Lo River, a tributary of the Cua Viet River which empties into the South China Sea. Dong Ha Airfield served as the command's logistic support area and provided a forward helicopter staging area.

The terrain in which the task force was to operate varied from coastal plain east of Route 1, traversable by wheeled and tracked vehicles, to dense





undergrowth and jungle forests inland covering the rugged mountains. Between Dong Ha and Cam Lo, the ground is fairly level and cultivated, with populated areas along the Cam Lo River. North of Cam Lo, the terrain consists of rolling hills covered with scrub growth and coarse elephant grass. West of this piedmont area, the terrain is composed of a series of ridges and steep hills rising to an elevation of 550 meters. Heavy foliage and rough terrain made all ground movement difficult and reduced the number of possible helicopter landing zones. The heaviest fighting of Hastings was to occur in the Song Ngan Valley, six miles northwest of Cam Lo and about one-to-three miles south of the DMZ.

After studying the available intelligence based on the air and ground reconnaissance, the allied commanders determined that the 90th NVA Regiment, estimated at a strength of 1,500 men was using the Ngan Valley as one of its major infiltration routes into Quang Tri. Furthermore, they believed that the 324B Division had established its command post on Hill 208, a strategic height overlooking the southwestern portion of the valley. Working from these premises, General English drew up his plan of action "... to take the enemy by surprise on his key trails and behind his own lines and to smash and destroy him before he had a chance to regain his balance and momentum."<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after the activation of his command and before his move to Dong Ha, General English issued his order for the expansion of Hastings. Based largely on the plan developed at the conference at Hue on the 11th, but with D-Day postponed from 13 to 14 July, and finally firmly established for 15 July, English's concept of operations called for a two-battalion helicopter assault in the Ngan Valley. Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines was to land in the southwestern sector of the valley and establish blocking positions below the bend of the river to prevent enemy movement. Three miles further to the northeast, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Arnold E. Bench, was to land near the mouth of the valley and attack southwest along the high ground toward Hill 208 and the 3d Battalion's blocking positions.<sup>10</sup>

The plan for the Marine thrust into the Ngan Valley required an extensive buildup of allied forces in the north together with supporting operations. Two Marine battalions were to remain at the base



Marine Corps Photo A193954

*Gen William C. Westmoreland, ComUSMACV (center), together with senior Marine commanders, looks at a map depicting the battle situation in Operation Hastings. Gen Walt is to the left of Gen Westmoreland; MajGen Wood B. Kyle, CG 3d Marine Division is to the left and behind Walt; and BGen Lowell E. English, the Task Force Delta commander is to the right rear of Gen Westmoreland.*

areas. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, since 2 July commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jack D. Spaulding, would provide security for Dong Ha, while Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Dickey III's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at Cam Lo protected General English's CP and the nearby artillery positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines was scheduled to join Task Force Delta at Dong Ha on 16 July to relieve the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines of its airfield security mission. On 16 July, the Seventh Fleet SLF battalion, BLT 3/5, was to conduct an amphibious assault, Operation Deckhouse II, eight miles northeast of Dong Ha. After the SLF had established a firm foothold ashore, Deckhouse II was to be terminated and BLT 3/5 was to join Task Force Delta further inland. In the meantime, the South Vietnamese 1st ARVN Division and an airborne task force were to conduct Lam Son-289. The ARVN division was to operate in the area west of Route 1, north of Dong Ha, while the airborne task force was to operate south of Route 9.\* Major Colby's recon-

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\*General English observed that "General Truong [the CG 1st ARVN Division] moved his CP alongside so there was common access to all vital information of both commands." The former Task Force Delta commander remarked that this procedure had become "SOP in our battle operations." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187797

*An aerial view of Landing Zone Crow which was later called "Helicopter Valley" by the Marines. Three helicopters, apparently damaged, can be seen on the ground.*

naissance Marines were to screen the western approaches of the Hastings area of operations.<sup>11</sup>

The success of the planned extended infantry operations in northern Quang Tri depended on the close coordination of Marine supporting arms. Colonel Richard M. Hunt, the commanding officer of MAG-16, assumed the additional duty of tactical air commander for Task Force Delta and established a forward headquarters at the small airfield at Dong Ha. In his latter capacity, Hunt had control of both fixed-wing and helicopter support for Hastings. He collocated a direct air support center (DASC) with the Task Force Delta fire support coordination center at the Cam Lo CP. Major Samuel M. Morrow, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, had five artillery batteries under his operational control on 15 July. The reinforced artillery batteries consisted of 30 tubes, 18 105mm howitzers and 12 155mm howitzers. Morrow had moved one 105mm battery three miles southwest of Cam Lo to provide direct support for the ARVN task force operating south of Route 9. To support the Marine battalions, the artillery commander positioned his other batteries at the Cam Lo Combat Base.<sup>12</sup>

On the morning of 15 July, the Marine penetration of the Ngan Valley began. A-4 Skyhawks from MAG-12 joined F4-B Phantoms from MAG-11, bombing and napalming the two helicopter landing

zones.\* Once the Marine attack aircraft had completed their bombing runs, Morrow's artillery fired an opening salvo at 0725 on Landing Zone Crow, the objective of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. After 20 minutes of preparation fire, 20 CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters from HMM-164 and -165 brought the first wave of Marines into Crow, five miles northeast of the Rockpile.

Although the Marines met no initial resistance in the landing zone, small arms fire and the terrain took their toll of men and machines. The landing zone was small; two helicopters collided and crashed. A third CH-46 hit a tree while trying to avoid the first two. As a result of these collisions, two Marines were dead and seven were injured. All three helicopters were too badly damaged for recovery and would have to be destroyed. Later that evening, the North Vietnamese shot down another troop-laden helicopter, which fell near Lieutenant Colonel Vale's

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\*See MAG-11 Sit Rep for 15 July 66 in MAG-11 ComdC, July 66. During the rest of the day the Marine Phantoms were to fly 14 more sorties and the group's F-8 Crusaders flew several sorties in support of Hastings. The MAG-12 records do not indicate the number of sorties flown as landing zone preparation missions, but for the day of 15 July the Skyhawks flew 31 sorties, over 47 hours, and dropped more than 12 tons of bombs and two tons of napalm. See MAG-12 ComdC, July 66.



Photo Courtesy of Wide World Photo

*A troop-laden Marine CH-46 is in flames after being hit by North Vietnamese ground fire near LZ Crow. The resulting crash left 13 Marines dead and three injured.*

CP, killing 13 men and injuring three others. Thereafter, the Marines referred to the Ngan Valley as "Helicopter Valley."<sup>13\*</sup>

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines are seen escaping from a crashed helicopter in Landing Zone Crow. Three helicopters were badly damaged during the landing of the battalion.*

Marine Corps Photo A187270

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\*Colonel Vale recalled in 1978 that "We picked the landing site from a helicopter flying at several thousand feet (to avoid ground fire and also not to give away that we were scouting out possible landing sites)." He remembered that in the first helicopter crash that the dead Marines had been killed by the "helicopter blades as they were getting out of the helicopters." The last helicopter, carrying reinforcements from the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, "came under ground fire from the ridge on the south side of the valley . . . The pilot tried to land in the landing zone but as he slowed down and hovered the smoke got into the flight compartment and he had to move forward to keep the smoke out. As a result, he overshot the landing zone and after moving over the CP tried to set down again. By this time the helo was rolling and barely remaining airborne. The pilot had to move forward again and then crashed on the edge of the area in which our CP and 81 mortars were set up." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Lieutenant Colonel Vale had arrived in LZ Crow with three of his four companies.\* Company M had stayed at Phu Bai as security for the base. He established his CP in the landing zone and held Company I as battalion reserve. First Lieutenant Charles L. George's Company I formed a defensive perimeter around the landing zone. Vale's two other companies, K and L, were to establish blocking positions south and west of LZ Crow. Company L, under First Lieutenant William E. Healy, encountered occasional small arms fire as it moved to occupy Hill 200, one kilometer west of the CP.

Captain Robert J. Modrzejewski's Company K followed a trail that meandered along the southern bend of the Song Ngan. The company's objective was a ridgeline 500 meters below the river and 1,800 meters south of the landing zone.<sup>14</sup> As Modrzejewski's platoons advanced toward the river, NVA snipers, hidden in the dense vegetation, opened fire. The Company K commander recalled:

Underneath the jungle canopy we found a complete 200-bed hospital in a bamboo building about 30 yards long and 20 yards wide. One man was guarding it, and we shot him. Inside we found 1,200 pounds of small-arms ammunition being guarded by three men. We shot them too.<sup>15</sup>

After this brief flurry, the Marine company continued to move southward toward its objective.

At 0935, while Vale's battalion was establishing its blocking positions, the Sea Knight helicopters of HMM-164 and -165 brought Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into Landing Zone Dove three miles to the northeast. With Companies H on the left, G on the right, and E bringing up the rear, Lieutenant Colonel Bench began advancing toward the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. Bench's battalion, like Vale's, had left one company behind

at the Phu Bai TAOR. Although the 2d Battalion made no contact with the enemy, oppressive heat and high elephant grass slowed progress. By midafternoon the battalion had covered less than two miles. Captain John J. W. Hilgers, the commander of Company H, in 1978 still vividly recalled:

... the problems we were having negotiating the terrain, particularly the vegetation. Though we knew our location, we could not see where we were going; trusting only to our compasses. The heat with no breeze and unlimited humidity was devastating.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Vale's battalion, continued to encounter heavy resistance. The North Vietnamese repulsed Company K's attempt to cross the Song Ngan, with a loss of three Marines killed and five wounded. After three more unsuccessful attempts to cross the river, Captain Modrzejewski decided to establish night positions on a hill 200 yards from the river. By this time, the NVA had begun to organize countermeasures and attacked the battalion with small arms, mortars, and machine gun fire. This fire continued unabated, even though the battalion called in air strikes and artillery on suspected enemy positions. At 1930, Lieutenant Colonel Vale reported that he was completely surrounded, but one-half hour later the enemy fire diminished. Vale believed that the opposing NVA unit had pulled back, but 45 minutes later, at 2015, a reinforced North Vietnamese company tried to overrun Company K's lines. After a nearly three-hour fire fight, the enemy finally fell back. According to Captain Modrzejewski:

It was so dark we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces, so we threw our trip flares and called for a flare plane overhead. We could hear and smell and occasionally see the NVA after that ... but in the morning ... we found 25 bodies, some of them only five yards away, stacked on top of each other.<sup>17</sup>

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\*Colonel Vale remembered that there was an hour-and-a-half to two-hour delay between the first and second lifts of his battalion. As he recalled, the helicopters after making the first lift returned to Dong Ha and brought the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines into its landing zone. The former 3d Battalion commander remarked: "I never did find out why this happened. Plans for the lift had been clearly made and the rest of the 3d battalion was in the pick-up zone ready and waiting. I landed in Crow after the first lift had cleared. I had been in a command UH1E flown by Colonel Richard Hunt, the MAG C.O., and General English." Col Sumner A. Vale, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).

By early evening, in the interim, Lieutenant Colonel Bench had halted his battalion about a mile short of its first objective, and directed that the battalion establish its night defenses. Earlier, about 1600, Lieutenant Colonel Vale had requested that the 2d Battalion come to the aid of the 3d Battalion, which was then under attack, but Bench had radioed back that "the terrain and time of day made immediate efforts [to reach the 3d Battalion] infeasible." With General English's permission, the 2d Battalion commander decided "to abort . . . [the]

sweep mission toward Hill 208," and take advantage of the "lower, easier, terrain" along the river to close in on Vale's positions the following morning.<sup>18</sup> During the 15th, Task Force Delta had sustained total casualties of 18 killed and two wounded as opposed to enemy losses of 31 dead.<sup>19</sup>

The enemy started the next morning with a mortar attack on Lieutenant Colonel Vale's CP. The battalion commander immediately called in Marine air and artillery which silenced the enemy weapons. South of the battalion CP, Modrzejewski's company still was unable to cross the river. The advancing Marines found it difficult to flush out the camouflaged NVA. The Company K commander stopped, organized a defensive perimeter, and called for air and artillery to neutralize the enemy. During the day, Lieutenant Colonel Vale's other two companies probed north and northwest of the battalion CP. Lieutenant Healy's Company L uncovered an ammunition cache which included 35 boxes of 12.7mm ammunition, 24 antitank mines, and 1,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.<sup>20</sup>

To the northeast, Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion moved off the high ground shortly after dawn toward the Song Ngan. Advancing in a generally westerly direction, the lead company, Company G, reached the river shortly after 0800 where the Marines killed two NVA and captured their weapons. The company then followed the river southwest toward the 3d Battalion. Bench's unit had one serious clash with the NVA when Company G, about 1045, received heavy fire from enemy positions on the high ground to the west of the river. The battalion commander several years later remembered that he "called *very close* airstrikes while we took cover in the deep banks of the river."<sup>21</sup> Marine aircraft scored two direct hits on the enemy, but not before the Marine company sustained losses of two dead and seven wounded. Despite further occasional resistance, the lead elements of the 2d Battalion arrived at Lieutenant Colonel Vale's CP shortly after 1445.<sup>22</sup>

Although the link up of the two Marine battalions had not been challenged seriously, the enemy renewed attacks during the night of 16 July. Once more, Captain Modrzejewski's Company K bore the brunt of the assault. The company had remained in its defensive positions 800 meters south of the junction point of the two battalions. At 1930, the North Vietnamese attacked the entire company perimeter,



Marine Corps Photo A187778  
*A Marine from Company G, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines holds his rifle chest-high as he crosses a stream. The battalion is moving to link up with the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in Helicopter Valley.*

concentrating heaviest pressure on the left platoon. For the next three and a half hours, the NVA made repeated assaults against the Marine company. Modrzejewski's Marines repulsed three attacks, one of which came to within five meters of their positions. The company commander credited Marine artillery fire "and a flare ship which stayed with us all night" in helping him to stave off the enemy. In beating back the NVA, the Marines suffered one dead and five wounded. Captain Modrzejewski reported that 30 to 40 other Marines had sustained minor wounds as a result of "grenades being thrown back and forth from distances as close as 10 meters." The enemy suffered more grievous losses. According to Modrzejewski:

... we could hear bodies being dragged through the jungle for four hours after the shooting stopped. A thorough search at first light revealed 79 enemy dead by body count. . . .<sup>23</sup>

While the two battalions had been moving toward each other in Helicopter Valley, General English repositioned his reserve. The arrival of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on 16 July at Dong Ha permitted the task force commander to free Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines from its security mission there. Over 30 helicopters from squadrons HMM-161, -164, -265, and -163 lifted Spaulding's battalion to Landing Zone Robin, 3,000 meters east-northeast of Landing Zone Crow. From this position, the battalion could readily reinforce either Vale's or Bench's battalion.

Also on the morning of 16 July, the SLF of the Seventh Fleet began Deckhouse II on the coast east of the Hastings area of operations. With clear weather, moderate seas, and minimal surf, Companies I and K of Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Bronars' BLT 3/5 landed with ease at 0630 across Blue Beach, 2,500 meters above the mouth of the Cua Viet River. Simultaneously Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough's HMM-363, the SLF helicopter squadron, lifted Company L 3,500 meters inland from the landing beach. By evening, the entire BLT was ashore and had established its defensive perimeter. Although technically Bronars' BLT did not come under General English's operational control for another two days, it blocked NVA routes of advance through the DMZ into Quang Tri Province east of Route 1, and was readily available to reinforce Task Force Delta if necessary. In fact, the SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-363, immediately came ashore and was assigned to the operational control of MAG-16's forward headquarters.\*

During the late afternoon of 16 July, General English achieved tactical surprise in his southwestern area of operations with the commitment of only a small force. At 1600, a platoon of Marines from Ma-

jor Colby's 1st Force Reconnaissance Company rappelled from a MAG-16 helicopter onto the summit of the Rockpile. From this perch, the reconnaissance troops had a commanding view of the relatively open terrain in this sector. Three hours later, the Marines spotted a column of North Vietnamese troops below them, 2,000 meters to the east-northeast. After 155mm howitzers from the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired 51 rounds at the enemy column, the reconnaissance Marines reported 21 enemy dead. Later that night, the Marine platoon observed flashing lights 1,000 meters south of the Rockpile near the bend of the Cam Lo River. They called for artillery; 3d Battalion guns once more replied. The mission results could not be observed due to darkness, but the reconnaissance Marines reported "excellent effect on target."<sup>24</sup>

Based upon the sightings from the Rockpile, General English decided to move Spaulding's battalion from Landing Zone Robin, 10 kilometers to the northeast, into the river valley east of the Rockpile. Twelve UH-34s and eight CH-46s from MAG-16 lifted the battalion into its new area of operations during the morning of 17 July. Spaulding's battalion encountered only minor resistance.

During the 17th, the two battalions operating in Helicopter Valley also had very little contact with the enemy. In Landing Zone Crow, Lieutenant Colonel Vale abandoned any further attempts to advance to the south and ordered Captain Modrzejewski's Company K to remain in its defensive positions and not to cross the Song Ngan. Anticipating a renewed enemy night assault on his forward company, the battalion commander ordered Lieutenant Healy's Company L to reinforce Company K. By evening, Vale's and Bench's battalions had established a common perimeter.

With the enemy on the high ground south of the Ngan blocking the Marine attempts to cross the river, General English decided to change his scheme of maneuver. On the evening of the 17th, he directed the two battalions to move out of the valley the next day along a corridor to the northeast. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion was to sweep and clear out any enemy as it advanced, and then establish blocking positions astride the Song Ngan, about a mile south of the DMZ. Vale's battalion, in the meantime, was to destroy the captured enemy ammunition and the three downed

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\*For reporting purposes, Operation Deckhouse II remained a separate operation from Hastings. Deckhouse II was a SLF operation under the operational control of the amphibious commander. See Chapter 19 for further discussion on the command and control of the SLF. BLT 3/5 AAR for Operation Deckhouse II and Operation Hastings, end 6, TF Delta AAR. Colonel Noble L. Beck commented on the difference in size between the fresh SLF battalion and the understrength in-country battalions. He remembered that when General English first saw "3/5 on the move . . . in battalion column," the Marine general exclaimed, "I'd forgotten just how big a *real* battalion is. . . ." Col Noble L. Beck, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Aug 78] (Vietnam Comment Files).



Courtesy of Wide World Photo

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rush for cover as the battalion's command post comes under mortar attack. The Marine radioman in the foreground carries his rifle and radio in his left hand and his armored vest in his right.*

helicopters, and then move to Hill 100, a mile southeast of the 2d Battalion's blocking positions. From Hill 100, the 3d Battalion was to attack southeast across high ground on the morning of the 19th and assault Hill 208, basically the same route of attack that the 2d Battalion would have followed according to the original plan.<sup>25</sup>

General English also planned to insert the SLF battalion, BLT 3/5, on the 18th into a small valley, a suspected NVA marshalling area, 3,000 meters south of the Song Ngan. U.S. Air Force B-52s had bombed this area on the afternoon of 17 July and the Marine battalion was to exploit the results of this strike.\* This valley, in the center of the Hastings operations area, was also an avenue of escape from the Song Ngan; the SLF battalion would be in position to support Vale's and Bench's battalions.

Deckhouse II ended on the morning of 18 July and Lieutenant Colonel Bronars SLF battalion was helilifted into its new area of operations that after-

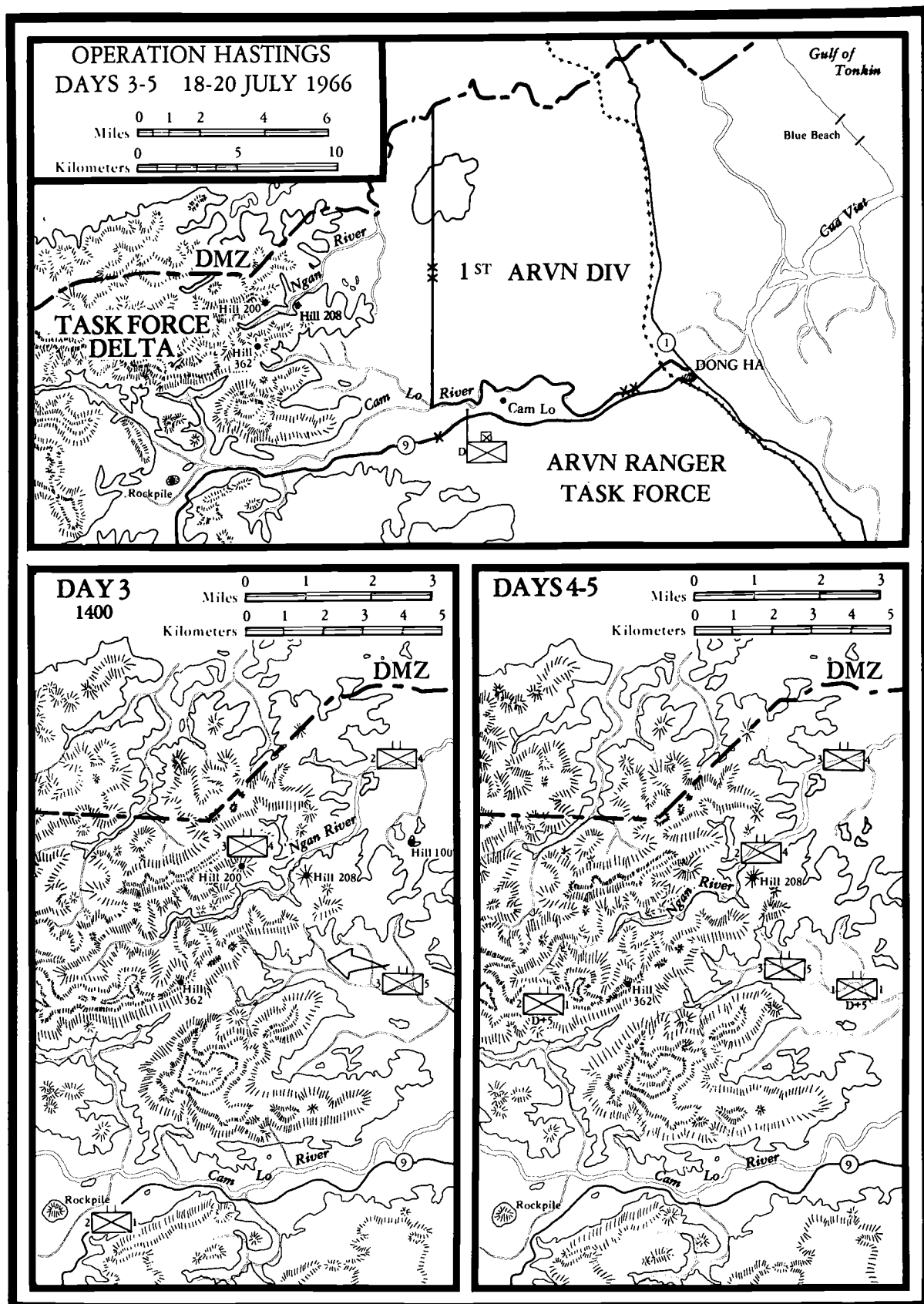
noon. Only Captain Harold D. Pettengill's Company M encountered serious resistance after landing. After Marine jets responded to Pettengill's call for support, the Marine company overran the enemy positions, killing 21 of the enemy and capturing two machine guns and 11 rifles. During the day, BLT 3/5 Marines killed three more NVA and then established night defenses.<sup>26</sup>

As the SLF battalion was landing 3,000 meters to the south, the two 4th Marines battalions began to carry out General English's new orders. The 2d Battalion moved through the valley in wedge formation with Company H on the left flank. By midafternoon the battalion had completed its sweep and Company H established a blocking position on the high terrain to the north and across the river.<sup>27</sup>

At about 1400, the 3d Battalion started to follow the 2d Battalion out of the valley. Company K, which had remained behind to provide security for the battalion command post and the engineers, who were to blow the ammunition and destroy the helicopters, was about to depart the area of the former landing zone about one half-hour later. At this time, the enemy struck, first with mortars, then with infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Vale, who had not yet left his CP, recalled several years later:

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\*The B-52 bombers from Guam carried out five strikes during Operation Hastings. The effectiveness of the raids is difficult to determine; only the raid on the 17th was exploited on the ground.





Since we had already filled in our fighting holes there was nothing to do but clear out of there on the double to the east, which we did. Unfortunately, the rear guard did not move fast enough and it was still in the area when the enemy infantry attack started.<sup>28</sup>

In the landing zone, Company K's 1st Platoon, under Staff Sergeant John J. McGinty, which had become separated from the rest of the company, endured the full thrust of the enemy assault. According to the platoon leader:

... we started getting mortar fire, followed by automatic weapons fire from all sides ... they were blowing bugles, and we could see them waving flags ... "Charlie" moved in waves with small arms right behind the mortars, and we estimated we were being attacked by a thousand men. We just couldn't kill them fast enough. My squads were cut off from each other, and together we were cut off from the rest of the company. I had some of my men in the high grass, where our machine gunners had to get up on their knees to shoot, which exposed them. "Charlie" never overran us, but he got one or two of his squads between us.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Modrzejewski tried to maneuver his other platoons to support McGinty, but to little avail. Air and artillery support was brought in, and as Modrzejewski later recalled:

We were getting mortars right in the landing zone and the bombs and napalm were dropping only 50 yards away from us. At one point, the NVA were trying to get the ammo out of those three wrecked helicopters that were still sitting there. Napalm got about 20 of them and then another 40, in the middle of the landing zone. I remember one kid shouting, "Here come some more Marines!" But they weren't Marines at all—they were NVA. And when they saw us, they ducked into the river on our flank. All we could see was their heads and their rifles above water—it was like shooting pumpkins.<sup>30</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Vale, in the meantime, "rounded up" his command group, "particularly the radiomen, to reestablish communications and get things sorted out."<sup>31</sup> He directed his executive officer, Major Clark G. Henry, to bring Company L to reinforce Company K. At the same time, he radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bench to come to his assistance.

Shortly before 1700, Company L joined Company K in the landing zone while Lieutenant Colonel Bench, with a hastily formed forward headquarters and his Company G, established supporting positions on the high ground. Quickly attaining fire superiority, the Marine reinforcements relieved the pressure on McGinty's platoon. Under covering fire, McGinty and his men were able to withdraw,

evacuating their wounded, but forced to leave the dead behind. Two platoons from Company I reinforced Companies K and L and according to Modrzejewski, "We formed a column of walking wounded, wounded to be carried, security, and then proceeded upstream, where the wounded were evacuated that night."<sup>32\*</sup>

For all practical purposes, the battle was over. By 1900, the two battalions formed a common perimeter where Lieutenant Colonel Bench had left his Company E, about 1,700 meters northeast of Landing Zone Crow. The enemy's attempt to obliterate the Marine rear guard had been costly. While friendly casualties numbered 14 dead and 49 wounded, enemy losses were 138 known dead; estimates ran as high as 500.<sup>33</sup> Modrzejewski's Company K, especially McGinty's platoon, had been hit hard. Of the 32 men in the already understrength platoon, 8 were dead and 14 were wounded. According to Modrzejewski, "our company was down from 130 to 80, and I had kids who were hit in five or six places."<sup>34</sup> Both Modrzejewski and McGinty received the Medal of Honor for their actions in Helicopter Valley.

Undoubtedly, Marine supporting arms had spelled the difference between success and disaster on the 18th. Major Morrow's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines fired 120 missions, expending nearly 1,000 rounds of 105mm and 155mm ammunition in support of the Marine battalions. Aircraft from MAG-11 and -12 flew 70 close support sorties. At one time, the Marine aviators were supporting three battalions at the same time: 3d Battalion, 4th Marines in Helicopter Valley; 3d Battalion, 5th Marines to the south; and an ARVN battalion to the east, with the "action too fast to count damage."<sup>35</sup>

Following the heavy fighting on 18 July, the enemy attempted to avoid battle and fought only when he had no choice. The remainder of Operation Hastings, with one exception, was characterized by a series of sharp, brief clashes followed by an enemy withdrawal.

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\*Colonel Bench remembered that he and Lieutenant Colonel Vale "coordinated the evacuation of 29 *seriously* wounded." Bench praised the work of the helicopter pilots, who "on a pitch-black night ... descended into an unlighted gorge, talked in by their exhaust glow, to have a flare popped when they were only a few feet off the landing zone." Col Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 20Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A187543  
*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move up Hill 208, the suspected CP of the 324B NVA Division. Smoke can be seen in the upper part of the picture from the airstrikes which preceded the attack.*

On 19 July, the two battalions exchanged missions. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, with the exception of Company K which was pulled out for rehabilitation, remained in its blocking positions, while the 2d Battalion consolidated its forces for the assault on Hill 208. Captain Hilgers' Company H, which had spent a long day and night, 18-19 July, on forward positions across the Ngan under constant NVA probing, rejoined the rest of the battalion on the afternoon of the 19th, having sustained relatively light casualties. The following morning, the 2d Battalion, after heavy airstrikes, attacked over the high ground toward Hill 208, the suspected CP of the 324B Division. According to General English, "Hill 208 was heavily fortified, but the position was

only lightly defended, and the division command post still eluded us."<sup>36</sup>

On the morning of 21 July, Company H, which had provided flank security for the attack on Hill 208, returned to "Helicopter Valley" to recover the Marine dead left behind during the fighting on the 18th. Moving against scattered enemy resistance, the company located six Marine bodies on a sand spit as if "they had been placed there in anticipation of evacuation." Further on, the troops found two more dead Marines, an officer and an NCO. Several NVA dead were also strewn about the former battlefield. Captain Hilgers, in 1978, remarked:

The startling thing about the whole situation is that none of the bodies (with one exception—the first NVA encountered, had no weapon and someone had attempted to hastily cover him with dirt) had been disturbed. They all had their weapons. The Marine lieutenant still had his pistol, binoculars and wrist watch. The helicopters had not been touched.<sup>37</sup>

While one platoon secured a hastily made HLZ and another platoon occupied itself with the evacuation of the Marine dead, Hilgers and his 1st Platoon continued to press forward. Later that afternoon they captured an enemy soldier, but then came under heavy enemy fire and returned to the HLZ. The following day the rest of the battalion joined Company H and continued the search of the valley.

During this time, General English began to deploy other Marine battalions farther to the south. On 20 July, Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines joined with BLT 3/5 in the valley below the Song Ngan. The 1st Battalion had been relieved at Dong Ha by the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines which had arrived at the airfield earlier that day from Da Nang. Both Bronars' and Bell's battalions met light but persistent resistance during the next three days as they moved west. According to the BLT commander, most of the encounters were with NVA units of less than 30 men:

The small [enemy] units appeared to be one of two types: Those who were assigned to delay and harass friendly units and those who had become separated from their present units and stumbled into contact with Battalion Landing Team 3/5.<sup>38</sup>

In order to close out any avenue of retreat for the enemy, on 20 July, General English ordered Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding's 2d Battalion, 1st Marines to establish blocking positions at the western exit of the valley, 4,000 meters north of the Rockpile. By the next morning, the battalion commander had

deployed two of his Companies, F and H, there. On the night of 21 July, both companies were taken under fire along their entire front. The Marines responded with small arms and mortar fire, as well as fire from the attached 4.2-inch Mortar Battery, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. The attack was broken up.

Although the NVA made a concerted effort to eliminate the Marine blocking positions, the enemy assault became more and more disorganized as it progressed. Shortly after midnight, Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding reported that the enemy action had subsided. The Marines had suffered two killed and 13 wounded; there was no way of determining North Vietnamese casualties.<sup>39</sup>

For the next two days, action was sporadic, but, on the 24th, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines found a North Vietnamese battalion 3,500 meters northeast of Spaulding's blocking positions. Lieutenant Colonel Bronars had ordered Company I, under Captain Samuel S. Glaize, to establish a radio relay station on Hill 362. Glaize's men had little difficulty reaching the top of the hill, getting there about noon, but when his 2d Platoon moved down the other side to put in forward defenses the North Vietnamese opened up. Taking full advantage of the concealment of 60- to 90-foot-high jungle growth, enemy soldiers cut down the Marines with rifle and machine gun fire.

Lance Corporal Richard A. Pittman, 1st Platoon, rushed forward with a machine gun to cover the ambushed 2d Platoon.\* The platoon survivors and Pittman fought their way back to the crest of the hill, but had to leave their casualties behind. According to Lance Corporal Raymond L. Powell, one of the wounded men of the 2d Platoon, the North Vietnamese soldiers went through the American bodies, methodically shooting "anyone who moved. It was darn near like a massacre. I pretended I was dead when they got to me. They took my cigarettes and my watch, but they didn't shoot me."<sup>40</sup>

The North Vietnamese then turned on the Marines on the crest of Hill 362. Two enemy mortars on each flank of the Marine position began to fire with deadly accuracy. According to one of the attached Navy corpsman, the Marines suffered most of their casualties in the first few minutes of the enemy

mortar barrage.<sup>41</sup> The Marines quickly dug in and there were relatively few casualties from there on. They remained under constant mortar fire for the next two hours until a Marine UH-1E gunship from VMO-2 temporarily silenced the enemy weapons.<sup>42</sup>

As soon as Lieutenant Colonel Bronars heard about the Company I ambush, he ordered Captain Richard E. Maresco's Company K to assist Glaize. Company K moved to within 300 yards of Company I's position on Hill 362 before meeting heavy enemy resistance. Despite the cover of Marine air and artillery, Company K was unable to advance and Captain Maresco had no choice but to dig in for the night.<sup>43</sup>

The elements also worked against the Marines. Rain squalls of Typhoon Ora and the thick jungle canopy hindered helicopter evacuation of the wounded. Temporary landing zones had to be blasted out of the jungle. Even after engineers were lowered to the ground by hoist from helicopters to help cut landing zones, MAG-16 helicopters could only take out the 11 casualties from Company K.<sup>44</sup>

Captain Glaize's company spent "one long night" on Hill 362.\*\* The North Vietnamese made repeated assaults against the Marine positions, often closing to within 15 to 30 feet of the company perimeter. Marine Corporal Mark E. Whieley exclaimed, "The Commies were so damn close we could hear them breathing heavily and hear them talking."<sup>45</sup> By dawn, however, the North Vietnamese had disappeared, and the Marine company remained intact.

By midmorning, under clearing skies, Company K had joined Company I on top of Hill 362. Company I had 100 casualties, 18 dead and 82 wounded, but, the enemy had been hurt too. The Marines counted 21 enemy bodies on the battlefield, recovered two NVA mortars as well as 27 rifles, a machine gun, and a recoilless rifle. Glaize's men also had captured two NVA soldiers, but one died during the night. As a

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\*Lance Corporal Pittman was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

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\*\*Captain James J. Kirschke, who at the time commanded the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines mortar platoon, recalled that about 2000, the enemy mortars once more opened up on Company I's positions. Major Robert A. Monfort, the battalion executive officer, turned to Kirschke, then a lieutenant, and asked him if he were the attacking enemy platoon commander where he would place his mortars. Kirschke "then provided the coordinates for an artillery mission which caused two secondary explosions." The mortar fire stopped. Captain James J. Kirschke, Comments on draft MS, dtd 7Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A190174

*Marines evacuate the wounded from Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines into a waiting helicopter. The company suffered 18 dead and 82 wounded in the fighting for Hill 362.*

result of the interrogation of the surviving captive, Bronars learned that his two companies had engaged the 6th Battalion, 812th Regiment.<sup>46</sup>

The bloody fighting of 24-25 July marked the end of the large-scale action during Hastings. On the 25th, General Kyle met with General English at Dong Ha to discuss the battle. He ordered his task force commander to withdraw his battalions to the south and southeast because "of the difficult terrain currently being encountered, the obstacles to infantry maneuver, and the paucity of landing zones for helo assaults." Kyle suggested that the Marines "saturate those difficult terrain areas in the vicinity of the DMZ which contain clearly defined enemy military activity with maximum artillery" and air strikes.<sup>47\*</sup>

#### *Hastings Comes to an End, 26 July-3 August 1966*

On 26 July, General English implemented his new orders. Lieutenant Colonel Bell's 1st Battalion, 1st

Marines, operating in the eastern sector of the same valley as the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, was ordered to move south toward Cam Lo. The SLF battalion, on the other hand, was to continue its advance to the southwest of the valley and operate just north of the Rockpile. Lieutenant Colonel Spaulding then moved his 2d Battalion, 1st Marines 3,000 meters east of the Rockpile into the Cam Lo River on 27 July.<sup>48</sup>

The Marines also began withdrawing from the Helicopter Valley region. As early as 21 July, General English had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Vale's 3d Battalion, which had been bled in the early fighting, with Lieutenant Colonel Dickey's relatively fresh 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in the blocking positions in the northern sector of the valley. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines had continued with its search mission in the southern portion of the valley against small but persistent enemy forces until 25 July. On one occasion, the battalion maneuvered against an enemy automatic weapon position. Bench described the event as one of the more unusual episodes of his career, declaring:

I was on a slope of the valley . . . a fire fight was going on below me in a relatively open area. Two of my companies were engaged, and I could see both of them, as well as a

*Marines from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines move through difficult terrain in the Helicopter Valley sector. The thick elephant grass pictured above reached heights of over four feet.*

Marine Corps Photo A187798



\*Colonel Samuel M. Morrow, who as a major commanded the artillery in Hastings, recalled in 1978 that General Kyle's directive was "to hit every grid square with artillery from my position north to the DMZ and westward to Laos. My reaction to this was that we had better get the ammunition trains running throughout the Pacific because we would be out of ammunition by noon the following day." Col Samuel M. Morrow, Comments on draft MS, dtd 23May78 (Vietnam Comment File).

third one, which was behind me. I was able to control the whole operation by arm signals, and as I stood there moving my arms I could see North Vietnamese and Marines firing and falling.<sup>49</sup>

On the night of 24-25 July, the Marine battalion sustained casualties of one killed and 64 wounded from an NVA mortar attack.<sup>50\*</sup> Later, on the afternoon of the 25th, the battalion CP "received a direct hit by two 250 lb bombs,"<sup>51</sup> dropped short of their target by U.S. aircraft, but "Miraculously, no one was killed. . . ."<sup>52</sup>

On 26 July, General English relieved the battle-weary 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hess' 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. The following day, both Hess' and Dickey's Battalions marched south out of the valley. On the 29th, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at the Task Force Delta CP while Dickey's battalion established a new area of operations, 3,500 meters northwest of Cam Lo.

With the withdrawal of the infantry battalions to the south, the role of the reconnaissance Marines became even more important. From the beginning of the operation, Major Colby's men had conducted deep patrols and called down supporting arms upon enemy forces. Colby had laid down four basic rules:

1. Stay together no matter what happens;
2. Upon reaching an observation post, call artillery fire upon a set of known coordinates so later fire missions can be called by shifting from a reference point;
3. Maintain constant radio communications with headquarters;
4. Never stay in one spot more than 12 hours.<sup>53</sup>

On 28 July, one of these patrols, led by Sergeant Orest Bishko (and accompanied by Captain Francis J. West, a Marine reservist who was on a special assignment from Headquarters Marine Corps to develop small unit combat narratives of Marines in Vietnam) reported approximately 150 to 250 North Vietnamese troops about three and one-half miles southwest of the Rockpile. The team adjusted ar-

tillery fire on the enemy force. As a result of this particular action the enemy lost 50 men.<sup>54</sup>

According to West, after he returned to III MAF Headquarters and described the patrol to General Walt and Colonel Chaisson, they both expressed the opinion that such missions deserved a special section in the reporting system and selected the name "Stingray" for this purpose.<sup>55</sup> Major Colby claimed that the marriage of the reconnaissance Marines and artillery was one of the major innovations of the war, declaring "Recon elements are a truly deadly force in hiding among enemy units with this capability in hand."<sup>56\*\*</sup>

The action of 28 July was the last significant sighting of a large body of enemy troops during Hastings. The *324B Division* either had crossed into the DMZ or was hiding in the inaccessible jungle to the west. On 30 July, Lieutenant Colonel Bronars' BLT 3/5 reverted to the operational control of the Seventh Fleet and returned to the *Princeton*. Two days later, General English deactivated his headquarters and the operation came under the control of the new 4th Marines commander, Colonel Alexander D. Cereghino. Hastings officially ended on 3 August. Only Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, supported by an artillery battery and reconnaissance elements, remained in the Hastings area of operations.

During Hastings, Marine supporting arms played a decisive role. Marine F-4B Phantoms, A-4 Skyhawks, and F-8 Crusaders maintained a sortie rate of 100 a day, averaging 32 close air support missions, 40 interdiction missions, and 28 radar-controlled missions. During the entire operation, attack aircraft completed 1,677 tactical sorties against the enemy. At the same time, MAG-16 helicopters flew nearly 10,000 sorties and lifted a daily average

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\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Colby wrote in 1978 that in Stingray operations, the artillery, usually two guns, "was actually placed in direct support of a single recon team for the duration of its mission." LtCol Dwain A. Colby, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File). The term "Stingray" was in use at HQMC by mid-August to describe these operations while FMFPac began reporting "Stingray" activities in its July summary, using as its starting date for statistical analysis Sergeant Howard's patrol of 13 June 1966. HQMC, G-3 Division (A03H-14), Point Paper, dtd 16Aug66 (HQMC G-3 Div, Point Papers, West Pac, Jul-Dec66), and FMFPac, *III MAF Ops*, Jul66. (See chapter 8 for the description of Sergeant Howard's patrol.)

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\*Colonel Bench remarked that just before the mortar attack an attached U.S. Navy psychological warfare team began broadcasting taped appeals for the enemy to surrender. According to Bench, the NVA cleverly used "the noise shield of the broadcast" to muffle their mortar attack, thus resulting in the large number of casualties. Col Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 20Jul78 (Vietnam Comment File).



Marine Corps Photo A801286

*Marines from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines are seen in a temporary base area near Dong Ha. The "pitched tents" are actually ponchos used as tents since they were easier to carry than the shelter halves.*

of 620 troops. On the ground, Major Morrow's artillery fired nearly 34,500 rounds in support of the Marine and South Vietnamese infantrymen.<sup>57</sup>

Logistic support during the operation had also been massive. By 18 July, the KC-130 transport planes from VMGR-152 and -352 had hauled 1.3 million pounds of supplies from Da Nang to Dong Ha. From that date to the end of the operation, the transport pilots brought in 115 tons per day to sustain the Marine task force. In addition, "Rough Rider" truck convoys, using Route 1, brought 120 tons of ammunition from Phu Bai to the task force logistic support area at Dong Ha. MAG-16 and -36 helicopters were used exclusively to move the supplies from the LSA to the battalions in the field. Despite the fact that after 21 July all CH-46A helicopters were grounded for mechanical reasons, the 42 UH-34s and four CH-37s at Dong Ha lifted an average of 75 tons per day, with a peak of 110 tons, to supply the infantry battalions.<sup>58</sup> General English later reminisced: "I was a battalion commander at Iwo Jima and I didn't get anywhere near the support I was able to give these Marines here."<sup>59</sup>

Operation Hastings/Lam Son-289, the largest and most violent operation of the war up to that point, involved 8,000 Marines and 3,000 South Vietnamese. The number of North Vietnamese regulars engaged probably equalled the total American and

South Vietnamese strength. During the battle, the Marines fought elements from all three regiments of the 324B Division: the 90th, the 803d, and the 812th.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties. The Marines had lost 126 killed and 448 wounded while the ARVN had 21 killed and 40 wounded. The allies inflicted a still higher toll on the enemy; reported enemy casualties numbered over 700 killed and 17 captured. Enemy equipment losses were significant, included were over 200 weapons, 300 pounds of documents,\* and over 300,000 rounds of ammunition.<sup>60</sup>

Summing up this major engagement along the DMZ, General Walt described the enemy in the following terms:

We found them well equipped, well trained, and aggressive to the point of fanaticism. They attacked in mass formations and died by the hundreds. Their leaders had misjudged the fighting ability of U.S. Marines and ARVN soldiers together; our superiority in artillery and total command of the air. They had vastly underestimated . . . our mobility.<sup>61</sup>

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\*These 300 pounds consisted of some 6,000 individual documents and, according to General English, that for U.S. intelligence, "this was some of the most meaningful information found in South Vietnam up to this time." MajGen Lowell E. English, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

## CHAPTER 11

# The DMZ War Continues, Operation Prairie

*Reconnaissance in Force, 3 August-13 September 1966—Assault from the Sea, Deckhouse IV—The Continued Fighting for Nui Cay Tre (Mutter) Ridge and the Razorback—The Opening of Khe Sanh and the 3d Marine Division Moves North*

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### *Reconnaissance in Force, 3 Aug-13 Sep 66*

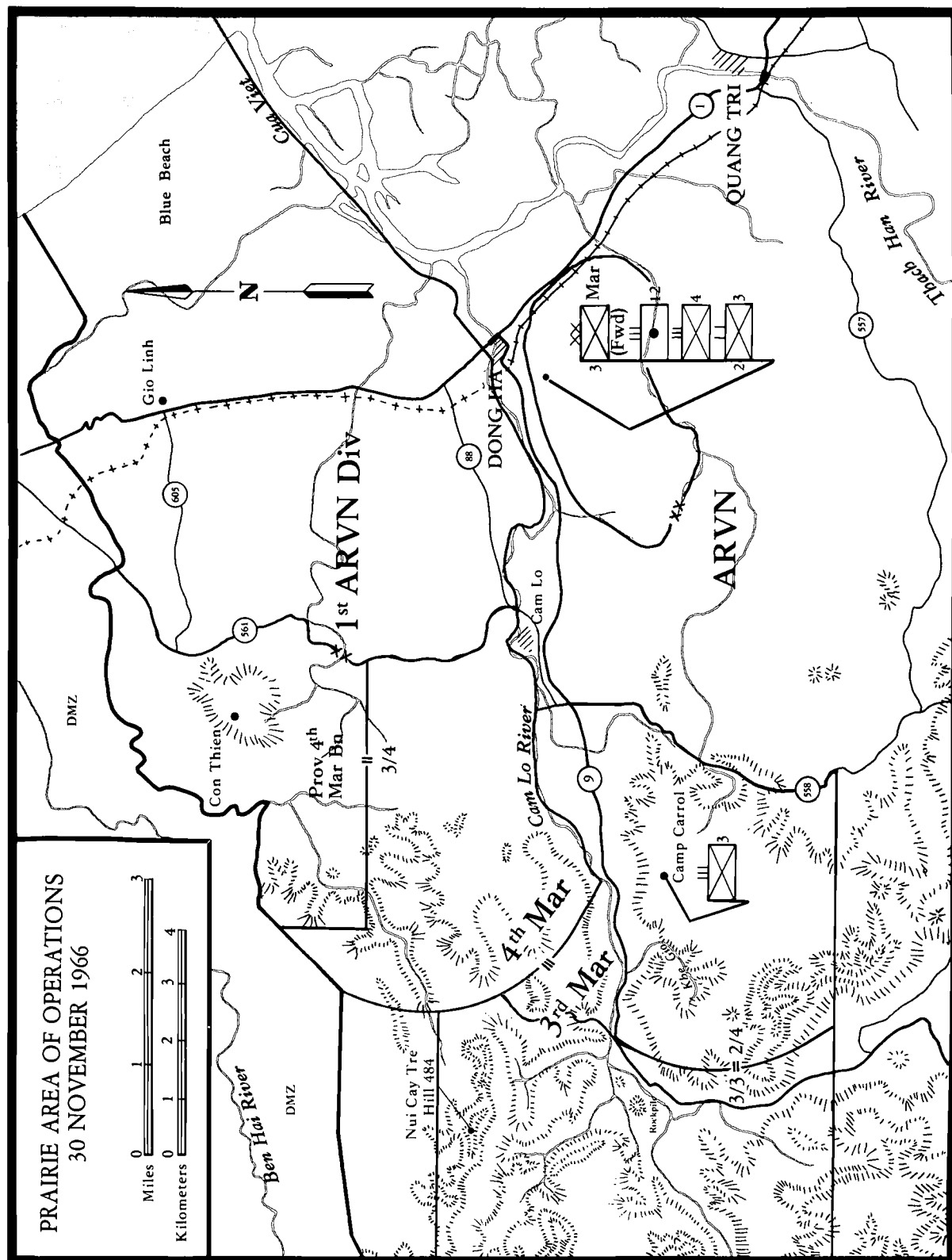
Enemy intentions in the DMZ area remained a matter of conjecture during the latter stages of Operation Hastings. On 22 July, Lieutenant General Krulak stated his opinion to General Westmoreland that the North Vietnamese were attempting to avoid direct contact with the Marines. Westmoreland replied that "just the reverse was the case and that the NVA forces were not seeking to get away." The MACV commander believed that III MAF could expect to encounter large numbers of the NVA and that elements of the *324B Division*, although bloodied, were still south of the DMZ. Furthermore, he had received reports indicating that the North Vietnamese were moving two more divisions, the *304th* and *341st*, into the area immediately north of the DMZ. Marine commanders recognized a buildup of enemy forces in the DMZ, but took exception to terms such as "massive buildup," "go for broke," "significant serious threats," and similar expressions contained in messages originating from Westmoreland's Saigon headquarters. Although MACV, FMFPac, and III MAF used identical intelligence data, they continued to interpret it differently.<sup>1</sup>

After the closeout of Hastings on 3 August, the Marine command retained a small task force, formed around Lieutenant Colonel Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines at Dong Ha, to monitor the potential threat in the north. Bench's command consisted of his four infantry companies, supported by the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company and Battery G, 3d Battalion, 12th Marines, reinforced by two 155mm howitzers. Also attached to the 2d Battalion were a platoon each from the 3d Tank Battalion, the 3d Antitank Battalion, the 3d Engineer Battalion, and a logistic unit from the Force Logistic Command. The battalion CP was established at the Dong Ha air strip, but the attached artillery and tanks were at

Cam Lo; two infantry companies, F and G, provided security for the artillery positions. Two helicopter detachments, one from MAG-16 and the other from the U.S. Army 220th Aviation Company, were at Dong Ha to support the ground force.<sup>2</sup>

The Marine plan for the operation, codenamed *Prairie*, to determine the extent of NVA forces in the DMZ sector relied heavily upon the reports of Major Colby's reconnaissance Marines. UH-1Es from VMO-2 were to insert four- or five-man "Stingray" teams along suspected enemy avenues of approach. If the reconnaissance teams made contact with any NVA, they could call for artillery from Cam Lo, helicopter gunships, or Marine aircraft from Da Nang or Chu Lai. The infantry companies at Cam Lo and Dong Ha were poised to reinforce the reconnaissance patrols. Colonel Cereghino, the 4th Marines commander, held two battalions on eight-hour alert at Phu Bai to move to Dong Ha in the event of major enemy infiltration from the DMZ.

The first significant encounter during *Prairie* involved a Stingray patrol. On 6 August, a UH-1E inserted a five-man team in a jungle-covered hill mass 4,000 meters north of the Rockpile, approximately 1,000 meters to the southeast of the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. The team, codenamed *Groucho Marx*, reported that it saw NVA troops moving along the trails and could smell smoke from enemy camp sites. The patrol twice called for the artillery at Cam Lo to fire on the suspected locations. On the morning of the 8th, the Marines saw 10 to 15 North Vietnamese troops moving in skirmish line 100 meters away, apparently looking for the American patrol. The team leader, Staff Sergeant Billy M. Donaldson, radioed Major Colby and reported the situation. Colby sent a pair of gunships to cover the patrol and then asked "if they thought we could get some prisoners out of there if I sent in a reaction force. They said affirmative and that there was a landing zone within 150 meters of them."<sup>3</sup>





Shortly afterward, six HMM-265 CH-46s landed in the zone, debarking a 40-man Marine platoon from Company E led by Second Lieutenant Andrew W. Sherman. By the time Sherman's platoon reached the reconnaissance team's perimeter, the enemy had disappeared. After a short, futile search for the North Vietnamese, Sherman asked for helicopters to lift the Marines out of the area.

In midafternoon, eight UH-34s from HMM-161 arrived overhead to extract the Marines. The first helicopter landed in the improvised landing zone without incident, but when it took off, North Vietnamese troops opened fire from a ridgeline to the north. Five UH-34s landed, but were able to evacuate only 20 of the 45 Marines because of the heavy fire. Lieutenant Sherman waved off the rest of the helicopters and set up a defensive perimeter.

At this point, the enemy, in company strength, tried to assault the Marine position. The American defenders turned them back with hand grenades and small arms fire, but Sherman was killed. His platoon sergeant, Sergeant Robert L. Pace, took command, but was wounded during the next NVA assault and command passed to Staff Sergeant Donaldson.

Surrounded, the small Marine force called for supporting arms. The 155s at Cam Lo responded immediately and at 1830, F-4B Phantoms from MAG-11 arrived overhead and stopped one NVA assault. Sergeant Donaldson was severely wounded during the last attack.<sup>4</sup>

At Dong Ha, the Company E commander, Captain Howard V. Lee, asked Lieutenant Colonel Bench for permission to take a relief force into the battle area to evacuate the Marines. The battalion commander finally acceded to Lee's entreaties and the captain gathered together seven volunteers besides himself. Three HMM-161 UH-34s flew the relief force to the battle site, but enemy fire forced the helicopters to land outside the Marine perimeter. Only three of the volunteers, including Lee, were able to reach the defenders. A VMO-2 UH-1E, piloted by Major Vincil W. Hazelbaker, evacuated the remaining Marines from the aborted relief expedition and flew them back to Dong Ha. Upon arriving in the shrinking Marine perimeter, Captain Lee immediately took command, reorganized the defenses, and supervised the distribution of ammunition which the helicopters had dropped inside the position.<sup>5</sup>

The enemy continued to close in on the Marines,

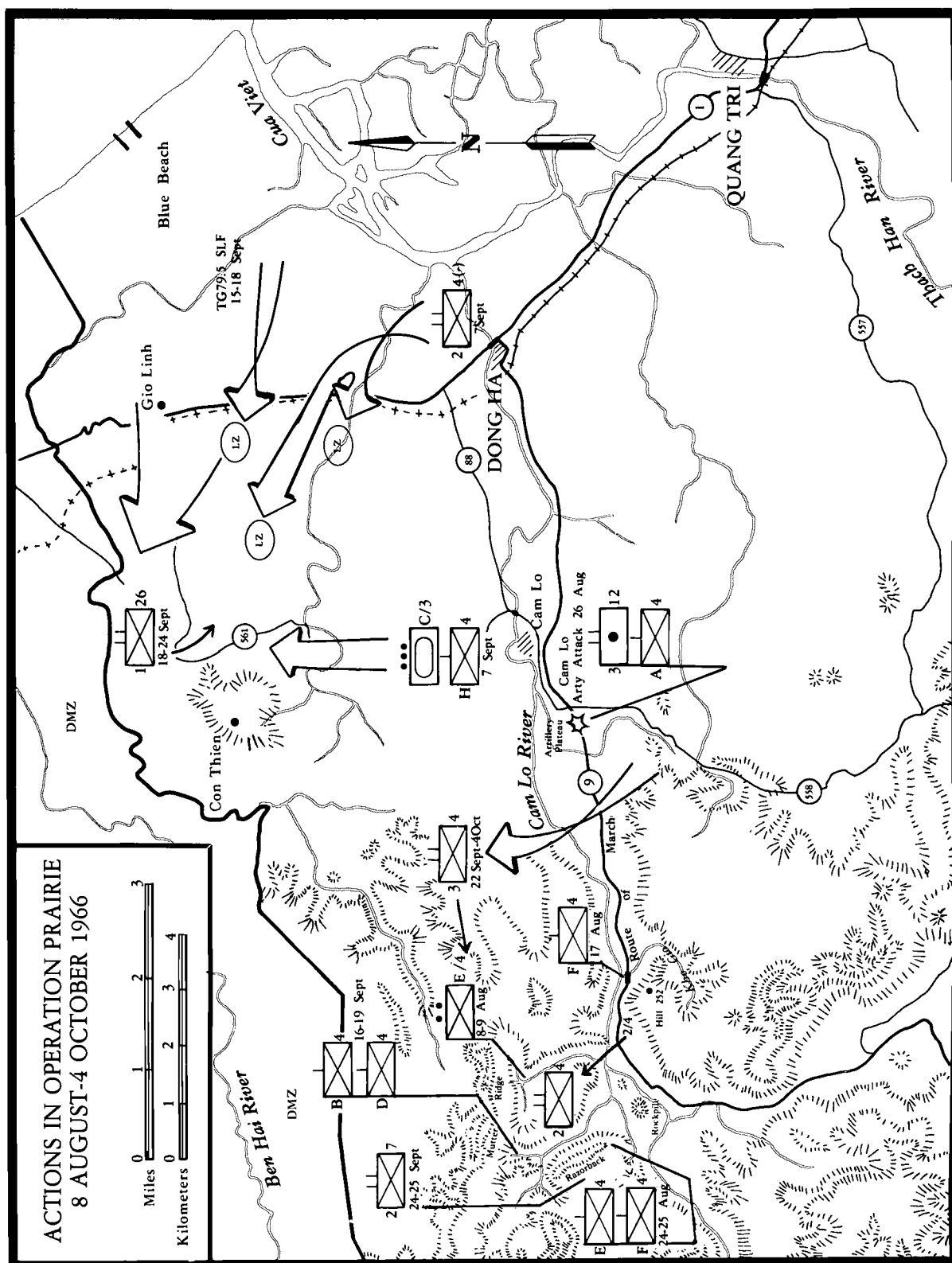
and, at the same time, prevented any more helicopters from landing. NVA ground fire drove off two HMM-265 CH-46s carrying additional Company E troops and hit one UH-1E gunship killing a crew member and wounding another. The Marine defenders repulsed repeated assaults on their positions, but their situation deteriorated. At 2030, Lee radioed Bench that he had only 16 men still able to fight. The company commander, himself, had been wounded twice, a slight nick on the ear when he first debarked from the helicopter and later severely, when an "NVA grenade . . . exploded no more than two feet" from him, "sending fragments into . . . [the] right eye and the right side of [his] body."<sup>6</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Bench provided what support he could. He ordered all available artillery, firing at maximum range, including a section of 81mm mortars from the Marine outpost on the Rockpile, to hit the enemy-held hill mass north of Lee's perimeter. The 105 battery was out of range and Bench ordered it and a section of M-48 tanks to displace so that at first light they would be able to support the surrounded Marines.

Although Marine high performance close air support was called off because of darkness and low ceiling, VMO-2 UH-1E gunships made numerous rocket and strafing runs on enemy positions. A Marine C-117 flare ship arrived to provide illumination, but each lull between flare drops allowed the enemy to move closer. Later that night, two Air Force AC-47s arrived and strafed the hill slopes outside the Marine perimeter.

Several helicopters from MAG-16 made repeated resupply attempts. Major Hazelbaker, when he evacuated the stranded Marines outside the perimeter, was able to get in close enough to the defenders' positions for his crew to push out several boxes of 7.62mm linked ammunition. Enemy fire, however, aborted all other such attempts. Shortly before midnight, Lee reported that his troops were almost out of ammunition. Hazelbaker volunteered to fly another resupply mission and successfully landed his aircraft inside the Marine defenses.

While the UH-1E was on the ground and the troops and crew were unloading the ammunition, an enemy rocket "impacted on the rotor mast," crippling the helicopter. After helping two wounded crewmen out of the damaged craft, Major Hazelbaker and his copilot joined the fight on the ground.<sup>7</sup>



The enemy attack which damaged the Huey was the last major effort against the Marine position. The helicopter crew distributed ammunition and incorporated the helicopter's M-60 machine guns in the defense. Major Hazelbaker and Captain Lee waited for the NVA to make their next move. According to a Navy corpsman in the perimeter:

The rest of the night was quiet . . . You could hear them [the NVA] drag off the bodies. Some would come right up to the brush line and just start talking. Every time we shot at them another grenade would come in. They were trying to feel out our position.<sup>8</sup>

In the early morning hours, Captain Lee, weak from loss of blood, relinquished command to Major Hazelbaker. At dawn, the major directed a Marine napalm strike on the enemy positions; NVA fire completely stopped. Two hours later, Company F and the battalion command group arrived at the Marine-held hill, followed shortly by the rest of Company E. The two units fanned out, but the enemy had left the immediate area.

The Groucho Marx fight was over and the last Marines were lifted out that afternoon. The Marines had lost five killed and 27 wounded. Four of the dead Marines were from Company E, while one was a UH-34 gunner from HMM-161, killed by enemy ground fire. Of the wounded, 15 were from Company E, one from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, and the remainder from the MAG-16 helicopter crews including three pilots. The Marines counted 37 enemy bodies on the slopes of the hill, but bloodstains and drag marks indicated that the enemy had suffered much heavier casualties. The Marines recovered a document from one of the NVA bodies, which indicated that the dead man had been a company commander. For the Groucho Marx action, Captain Lee received the Medal of Honor, while Major Hazelbaker was awarded the Navy Cross.<sup>9</sup>

Prairie was just beginning. The action of 8-9 August convinced Colonel Cereghino, an experienced infantry officer who had served in both World War II and Korea, that the enemy had returned in strength.<sup>10</sup> On 13 August, he established a forward command post at Dong Ha and moved Lieutenant Colonel Jack Westerman's 1st Battalion, 4th Marines north from Phu Bai. In addition, the infantry was reinforced by Major Morrow's 3d Battalion, 12th Marines and Captain John H. Gary's Company C, 3d Tank Battalion. Westerman's battalion was to relieve



Marine Corps Photo A187655  
*MajGen Wood B. Kyle, Commanding General, 3d Marine Division (back to camera), greets two members of Company E upon their return to Dong Ha. Elements of the company reinforced a reconnaissance team near the DMZ and stood off an attack by a North Vietnamese battalion.*

Bench's battalion at Dong Ha and Cam Lo. Colonel Cereghino then ordered Bench to conduct a reconnaissance in force along Route 9 between Cam Lo and the Rockpile, followed by a search and destroy mission north of that site. Bench's 2d Battalion, 4th Marines left Cam Lo on 17 August after being relieved by Westerman's unit.

The 2d battalion with three companies, Company H remaining at Cam Lo, departed the base area about 0730 on foot. Marine air and artillery pounded suspected enemy strong points along the battalion's route of march. At 1215, Marine fixed-wing attack aircraft bombed Hill 252, whose steep cliffs overhung a bridge on Route 9, spanning the Song Khe Gio, a small north-south tributary of the Cam Lo River. After the airstrike, Company F, the lead company, pressed forward, but "was stopped dead at the bridge held by a bunker complex carved out of the sides of Hill 252."<sup>11</sup>

With his lead company unable to move, and his other two companies unable to maneuver to support Company F because of heavy enemy automatic weapons fire and NVA snipers well-hidden in



Marine Corps Photo A188143

*A Marine tank column is shown advancing along Route 9. M48 tanks, like those pictured here, provided much needed support to the infantry road reconnaissance during Operation Prairie.*

camouflaged "spider traps," Lieutenant Colonel Bench called for artillery and air support. The resulting airstrikes and artillery missions, however, had little effect on the enemy concrete and metal-plated bunkers dug into the solid rock of Hill 252. Bench then requested Colonel Cereghino to reinforce his battalion with a section of tanks from the tank company at Cam Lo. The two M-48 tanks from Company C arrived at the Company F forward positions about 1600. After another airstrike, the M-48s with their 90mm guns laid direct fire into the enemy bunker complex. With the assistance of the tanks, the Marine infantry company withdrew to the night defensive positions of the rest of the battalion. Another tank from Company C reinforced the infantry and during the evening of 17 August, Marine air and artillery, as well as the tanks, continued to hit the enemy fortifications. About 1940 an air observer spotted about 40 enemy troops moving off Hill 252 in a southwesterly direction and called an air strike "with good coverage on target." For the day, the Marines sustained casualties of two dead and five wounded, all from Company F, while killing about 20 of the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

On the morning of 18 August, following a further bombardment of the enemy bunkers, Company G forded the Khe Gio south of the bridge and took Hill 252 from the rear, while the rest of the battalion continued its advance along Route 9. The Marines of Company G found in the former enemy fortifications three dead NVA soldiers, a light machine gun, and an inscribed sword. Reinforced by yet another

tank section, the 2d Battalion completed its reconnaissance of Route 9 that evening, encountering only minor resistance, and established its night defensive positions north of the Rockpile. The tank platoon returned to Cam Lo the following day while the 2d Battalion began its search and destroy mission in the high rugged terrain between the Rockpile and the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. Although employed in relatively poor tank country, the M-48s had proved effective against an enemy strongpoint which Marine infantry and other supporting units had not been able to neutralize.<sup>13</sup>

For the next six days, the battalion found itself heavily engaged with elements of the 803d NVA Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Bench had established his command post on a mountain some 2,000 meters northeast of the Rockpile and ordered his three companies "to fan out" and search the prominent terrain features 500 to 1,000 meters to the north, northwest, and northeast. On the 19th, Company E in a reconnaissance of a wooded ridge came across two concrete enemy bunkers. As the Marines maneuvered to reduce the enemy defenses, NVA 12.7mm machine guns on each flank and from the bunkers caught one Marine platoon in a crossfire. At the same time, enemy gunners mortared the company rear which had laid down a base of fire. Despite sustaining casualties of two dead and 14 wounded, the Marine company, supported by the 155mm howitzers at Cam Lo, Marine fixed-wing airstrikes, UH-1E gunships, 81mm mortars, and 106mm recoilless rifles, destroyed the enemy defenses and gun positions and killed a possible 30 of the enemy. From the 20th to the 22d, and after a B-52 strike in the valley behind the former enemy positions, the companies of the battalion continued to catch glimpses of enemy troops and occasionally were the targets of enemy mortars and heavy machine guns.<sup>14</sup>

At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Bench became concerned with a new turn of events that threatened the 11-man outpost on the Rockpile. The sheer cliffs of the 700-foot outcropping prevented resupply of the Marines there except by helicopter. Indeed, the Marine pilots had to perform the demanding maneuver of landing one wheel of their helicopter on the edge of the Rockpile while the aircraft hovered until the cargo could be unloaded. On 21-22 August, an enemy 12.7mm machine gun, positioned strategically midway between the Rockpile and another hill mass, nicknamed the



Marine Corps Photo A332463 (LtCol Curtis G. Arnold)  
*A Marine helicopter provides resupply for the Rockpile. One wheel rests on the wooden ramp while the aircraft hovers until it can be unloaded.*

Razorback because of its sharp contours, 1,000 meters to the northwest, opened fire on the resupply aircraft. Repeated attempts by Marine air and artillery failed to silence the gun, which imperiled the helicopter lifeline to the Rockpile. Moreover, on the morning of the 22d, Bench and his command group observed enemy troops at the base of the Rockpile and took them under fire with 106mm recoilless

rifles and called an airstrike. Captain John J. W. Hilgers, who had become the 2d Battalion S-3 earlier that month, recalled in 1978, that he and Bench "went on an air recon and came close to being shot out of the sky by the 12.7 whose position we inadvertently flew over and located."<sup>15</sup>

At this point, the morning of the 23d, Bench decided that he had to eliminate the enemy machine gun. He ordered Captain Edward W. Besch, who had relieved Captain Lee as commander of Company E after the action of 9 August, to "conduct a reconnaissance in force to locate and neutralize the 12.7 and supporting forces." Captain Hilgers recalled several years later that he briefed Besch and recommended that the company commander establish a base of operations near two "knobs" in the vicinity of the gun where helicopters could get in, but not to "count on [their] availability. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

Shortly after 1000, Besch departed the battalion CP with his company, which he later remembered consisted of less than 60 personnel, divided into two platoons of two squads each. About two hours later the Marine company arrived in the general objective area, some two miles to the southwest of its starting point. Besch established his base camp in the valley between the two "knobs," some 300 meters to the east of the southern portion of the Razorback. Finding little sign of any enemy in the immediate vicinity, he took three squads of the company to ex-

*A view of the Rockpile (in the foreground) looking northwest to the Razorback (in the immediate background). Enemy gunners positioned strategically near the Razorback threatened the helicopter lifeline to the Rockpile.*

Marine Corps Photo A332474 (LtCol Curtis G. Arnold)



plore the "rock face" of the hill mass. To cover his movements, Besch left in the camp site, under his executive officer, the remaining squad, reinforced by 60mm mortars and a 106mm recoilless rifle which had been brought in by helicopter earlier in the day.<sup>17</sup>

About 1400, Captain Besch with the forward elements of his company came upon a bowl-shaped ravine in the southeastern sector of the Razorback, honeycombed with caves. Besch several years later remembered that some of the "cave passageways were large enough to drive two trucks through, side by side. . . ." The Marines then began a systematic search of the caves. While encountering no enemy, the Marines found evidence, such as spent 12.7mm machine gun rounds, of recent occupation. With the exploration of the caverns taking him longer than he expected, Besch sent one of the squads back to look for the enemy machine gun on the low ground below the Razorback. The squad found no gun and returned to the company rear position held by the executive officer. Besch, in the meantime, with the remaining two squads continued to investigate the caves.<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after 1630, Besch made preparations to return to his base camp and close out the operation. A Marine helicopter already had lifted out the 106mm recoilless rifle and flew it back to its former positions with the battalion. About 10 minutes later, the Marines heard voices inside one of the caves. Hoping to take a prisoner, Besch attempted to coax out the NVA soldiers. Besch recalled that three shots rang out from inside the cave and:

Within seconds, squads of NVA soldiers . . . simultaneously erupted from five or six concealed caves in the craggy rock wall and immediately shot down the surprised Marine squad near the cave.<sup>19</sup>

The surviving Marines on the Razorback took what cover they could. Besch remembered that he and one of his two radiomen jumped into a bomb crater. Realizing that the other man was dying from a wound in the chest, Besch took the radioset and asked for supporting fires from the two squads still in the rear camp site. According to Besch, he and the small group with him survived only by feigning death.<sup>20</sup> Other remnants of his small force were scattered all along the ravine. The second radio operator, separated from Besch, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Bench that the North Vietnamese soldiers

were, "real close and closing on their flank, still throwing grenades and firing weapons."<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Lieutenant Colonel Bench, already concerned by the lapse of time that Besch had been on the Razorback, hastily prepared his plans for the relief of the embattled company. With Company E's forward positions on the outside fringes of the 155mm fan from Cam Lo, thus making the employment of artillery impractical, the battalion commander immediately requested both fixed-wing and helicopter gunships on station. At the same time, he formed a composite company by taking a platoon each from Companies F and G and his Headquarters and Service Company. His operations officer, Captain Hilgers, volunteered to take charge of the relief force and Bench reluctantly assented since he had no one else to send.<sup>22</sup>

By late evening, Marine helicopters had landed Hilgers' makeshift company, reinforced by two 106mm recoilless rifles, flamethrowers, and .50 caliber machine guns, near the Company E base camp. After joining the rear elements of Company E, Hilgers later commented that he had "little choice under the circumstances," but to send the platoon from Company F to the immediate relief of the trapped men and to deploy the Company G platoon "around to the south to protect our highly vulnerable southern flank where known NVA units were located, including the 12.7." He stated that he "took a calculated risk that no enemy units were located on our northern flank as Besch had been in

*A view from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines command post looking toward the Rockpile (extreme left of picture) and the Razorback ridgeline. Two bombs have just exploded behind the forward elements of Company E trapped on the Razorback by enemy troops.*

Marine Corps Photo 532579 (Capt Edwin W. Besch)



that area.”<sup>23</sup> By this time the Marine jets had arrived overhead and bombed a valley to the west that the North Vietnamese were using in an attempt to flank the Marines. Two Marine VMO-2 gunships about 25 minutes later also strafed the enemy.

During the night, the Marines brought their entire arsenal into the battle. Marine artillery and flareships provided illumination and a U.S. Air Force AC-47 opened up with 7.62mm mini-guns on enemy bunkers. After the first flare dropped, the surviving radio operator of Company E, although wounded, contacted Hilgers and attempted to direct 106mm recoilless rifle fire against the North Vietnamese troops. He died of his wounds while still trying to adjust the missions.<sup>24</sup>

With the assistance of the illumination provided by the flares, the Company F platoon, under 2d Lieutenant Stephen F. Snyder, made its way through the difficult jungle terrain to the face of the Razorback. Shortly after 0030 on the 24th, the platoon

*The face of the Razorback as seen by the relief force of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by the battalion's operations officer, Capt John J. W. Hilgers. The barrel of a Marine 106mm recoilless rifle can be seen in the foreground.*

Marine Corps Photo A332794 (LtCol John J. W. Hilgers)



reached the eastern lip of the natural bowl where the trapped men were, only to find Besch's Marines scattered below, and the North Vietnamese in control of the remaining three ledges of the ravine. Snyder hastily set up his defenses and then led a four-man patrol toward the western rim of the bowl where Besch had gathered together a few of his men to the side of a North Vietnamese-held cave. A North Vietnamese grenade barrage forced the patrol to turn back, but not before it had come within 15 meters of the remnants of Company E and rescued two of the wounded. Returning to its defensive positions, the Company F platoon laid down a base of suppressive fire and directed 106mm recoilless rifle missions upon the enemy positions.<sup>25</sup>

At about 0600, it became apparent that the North Vietnamese were about to launch a final attack upon the Marines. Snyder, instead of waiting for the assault, ordered a counterattack. Captain Besch several years later recalled that as the North Vietnamese troops came out of the caves and formed in the open, Snyder's men took them under fire. According to Besch, the enemy troops "were very quickly (within seconds, like turning down a radio volume button . . .) annihilated by the Marines, one of whom shouted, 'One of 'em is still moving, shoot the son-of-a-bitch,' and nearly every Marine reopened fire."<sup>26</sup> In the exchange of fire, Snyder was killed, his platoon sergeant badly wounded, and finally the platoon guide, Sergeant Patrick J. Noon, Jr., took over the relief platoon.

With daybreak, Lieutenant Colonel Bench was able to bring additional units into the battle. He sent the rest of Company G to reinforce Hilgers' composite force. Later that morning, Marine helicopters lifted two platoons of his reserve company, Company H, from Cam Lo to the battalion sector, thus allowing the remaining elements of Company F to go forward. One platoon of Company H accompanied a platoon of M-48 tanks from Cam Lo along Route 9 to the objective area. With the reinforcements, the 2d battalion went into the attack, but at a painfully slow pace. Firing from behind rocks and from caves, the North Vietnamese had the advantage of terrain. With the employment of recoilless rifles and the tanks at point-blank ranges, the battalion eventually gained the upper hand. Under cover of artillery, which also had moved forward, and air, the Marines blasted the NVA out of their caves. By midmorning, the forward



elements of the relief force reached the battered Company F platoon and remnants of Company E. Bench's unit continued to scour the ridges for the next two days, searching caves and bunkers for the enemy, but the fight for the Razorback was over.

Losses on both sides were heavy, but the NVA had suffered a serious reverse. They had lost their outpost and no longer were in a position to threaten the Marines on the Rockpile. During the engagement, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines sustained more than 120 casualties, including 21 dead. Eleven of the dead and 13 of the wounded, including Captain Besch whose arm was shattered, were from Company E. Estimates of enemy dead ranged from 120 to 170.\*

The Marines took one prisoner who identified himself as a sergeant and a member of the *803d Regiment, 324B Division*. The enemy soldier told his captors that his battalion's mission was to neutralize the Rockpile and then sweep eastward to join in an attack on the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines positions at Cam Lo.<sup>27</sup>

The NVA sergeant's information proved timely. During the early morning hours of 26 August, the enemy launched a two-company attack against the Marine artillery near Cam Lo. At 0300, 1st Lieutenant Gerald T. Galvin, the commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, whose unit was responsible for the security of the perimeter, reported to his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Westerman, that three of his outposts had seen movement to their front. Westerman ordered the company to "just sit tight and keep observing"

and to report any new development.<sup>28</sup> About fifteen minutes later, Lieutenant Galvin called back and declared that five outposts had spotted enemy troops moving toward their positions. According to Colonel Cereghino, who was with the battalion commander at Dong Ha, Westerman was about to send reinforcements to the company. Cereghino decided, however, that it would be too complicated an operation to move the Marines out in the dark. He believed that Galvin and his men "were in good shape, confident and gung ho" and that they could hold their own against any attacking force.<sup>29</sup> The regimental commander told Westerman "to hold up but to be prepared to move troops in a matter of minutes."<sup>30</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Westerman then directed Galvin to withdraw the outposts to the main perimeter and wait for the enemy to come through the wire, about 90 meters to the front.

The idea was to allow the NVA troops to crawl through the wire and then illuminate the area, making the North Vietnamese easy targets. The plan worked, in part. The wire channelized the infiltrators, the artillery fired illumination rounds, and an AC-47 dropped flares. On a prearranged signal, the Marines on the perimeter opened up on the attacking force, by then 40 to 50 meters in front of the Marine positions.

The enemy, however, was not entirely unsuccessful. Somehow the first wave passed through the Company A positions unnoticed and did do some damage. According to Lieutenant Colonel Westerman:

They [the NVA] snuck on through before we ever illuminated the area. . . . as you know, they're real proficient at moving at night . . . very silently, very slowly, and very patiently. . . . [the NVA] did get through even though our people were waiting for them. They crawled in between the holes, and our people never even realized that they passed through their positions.<sup>31</sup>

Those enemy troops that did get through placed explosive charges all over the positions, blowing up tents, trailers, and one tank retriever.

The destruction could have been much more extensive. Just the previous day, the 155mm howitzers had moved to new revetments further west to provide for better coverage of the Razorback-Rockpile complex. At the same time, the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines had also changed the location of its fire direction center. The NVA attacking force had excellent intelligence on the location of the old posi-

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\*Both the III MAF and 4th Marines ComdCs for this period show 26 NVA confirmed dead, but these figures were apparently from preliminary reports. The 2/4 AAR does not furnish a total casualty count, but Shaplen, in his account, lists 170 KIA. Shaplen, "Hastings and Prairie," p. 180. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's comments to the Historical Division state 137 enemy were killed. LtCol Arnold E. Bench, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Sep69 (*Vietnam Comment File*). Figures do not agree on Marine casualties. The 4th Marines shows 11 Marines KIA in its AAR, but this reflects only the casualties of Company E. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's comments list 21 Marines KIA, while Shaplen speaks of a "score" of Marine dead. Indicative of the heavy fighting was the number of medals awarded. Captain Hilgers, Lieutenant Snyder, and Sergeant Noon received the Navy Cross, while Corporal Paul M. Reed, one of the radio operators of Company E, and Corporal William F. Wright, a radio operator with the platoon from Company F, both received the Silver Star.



tions and these moves helped to diffuse the effects of the raid. Yet, the largest factor in keeping the damage to a minimum was the rapid response of the Marine defenders. Within two hours, Company A and a security force from the 3d Battalion, 12th Marines had control of the situation. The Marines captured one NVA soldier. He identified himself as a member of the *812th Infantry Regiment, 324B NVA Division*, which in coordination with a local VC unit, had made the attack. Had this unit been able to join with the battalion from the *803d NVA Regiment* as originally planned, the attack on the Marine artillery position might well have been much more serious.\* As it was, nine Marines were killed and 20 wounded. None of Major Morrow's artillery pieces were damaged.

This action at Cam Lo was the last significant contact in Operation Prairie during August. Lieutenant Colonel Bench's battalion returned to Dong Ha on 29 August to relieve the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines. The latter battalion moved from Cam Lo and Dong Ha and conducted a reconnaissance in force along Route 9, but met little resistance.

The month was a bloody one for both the Marines and NVA. According to Marine reports, Prairie accounted for over 200 enemy dead, while the Americans suffered 37 killed and 130 wounded during this phase of the operation.

Colonel Cereghino realigned his forces. On 27 August he assigned Lieutenant Colonel John J. Roothoff's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, which had just arrived from Chu Lai, the area of responsibility formerly held by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, including the Rockpile. When Westerman's battalion completed sweeping Route 9 into the Thon Son Lam area, 1,500 meters west of the Rockpile, it returned to Dong Ha, arriving on 7 September. It relieved Bench's 2d Battalion of the defense missions at both Dong Ha and Cam Lo.

At this point, Colonel Cereghino decided to extend his area of operations to the Con Thien region, due north of Cam Lo and adjacent to the DMZ. Bas-



Marine Corps Photo A187790

*Enemy dead lie inside the Cam Lo perimeter after their mostly aborted attack on the Marine artillery. Smoke from a destroyed tank retriever can be seen in the background.*

*LtGen Victor H. Krulak, CGFMFPac (center), discusses the battle situation with LtCol John J. Roothoff, Commanding Officer, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, whose battalion had just relieved the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines in the Rockpile sector, and Col Alexander D. Cereghino, Commanding Officer, 4th Marines. MajGen Wood B. Kyle, CG 3dMarDiv, is standing behind Gen Krulak.*

Marine Corps Photo A187832



\*Colonel Cereghino commented that even if the battalion from the *803d* had been on the scene, the attack had no chance of success, "because we were loaded and locked [at Dong Ha] and but a few minutes away, had Lieutenant Galvin or Major Morrow needed us." Col Alexander D. Cereghino, Comments on draft MS, dtd 17Aug78 (Vietnam Comment File).

ed on new intelligence that a battalion of the 324B Division was moving into the area, the 4th Marines commander ordered Lieutenant Colonel Bench to conduct a reconnaissance in force to determine the extent of enemy activity. Company H, accompanied by a platoon of tanks from Company C, 3d Tank Battalion, left Cam Lo on the morning of 7 September. MAG-16 helicopters ferried the rest of the battalion into landing zones around Con Thien. The first significant contact occurred the next morning when Company G ran into an enemy platoon 1,000 meters northeast of the ARVN Con Thien outpost. The firefight lasted for three hours before the enemy disappeared. Five Marines were killed.

The next day, Bench's Companies E and F, reinforced by tanks, engaged a NVA company two miles south of the DMZ. The enemy had expected the Marines. Numerous firing positions and trenches had been dug, extending into the demilitarized area itself. Lieutenant Colonel Bench ordered the tanks to fire point-blank into the enemy positions; after stiff resistance the NVA disengaged. The Marines counted 20 bodies and estimated that they had killed at least another 14. Bench's unit sustained three killed and 17 wounded. The battalion continued its reconnaissance in the area until the 13th, but met only scattered resistance and then returned to Cam Lo.

#### *Assault From The Sea: Deckhouse IV*

The reconnaissance by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines confirmed that elements of the 90th NVA Regiment, a subordinate unit of the 324B Division, were now operating south of the DMZ. General Walt had already planned an operation to determine the extent of enemy infiltration in the eastern portion of the Prairie area of operations. On 3 September, he requested that General Westmoreland obtain permission from the Seventh Fleet to use the Special Landing Force in the Con Thien-Gio Linh area.<sup>32</sup> After General Westmoreland acceded to the III MAF request, General Walt held a planning conference on 7 September at Da Nang, attended by representatives of the amphibious ready group and the SLF to work out the details. At that time, they changed D-day from 12 September to the 15th. In effect, the SLF operation, Deckhouse IV,

was to continue the reconnaissance in force that Bench's unit had just carried out in this area.\*

The operational concept provided for one company of BLT 1/26 (Lieutenant Colonel Anthony A. Monti) to land across Blue Beach, two miles south of the DMZ, north of the Cua Viet River. Lieutenant Colonel James D. McGough's HMM-363 was to bring the other companies into landing zones further inland, west of Highway 1. After the beachhead was secured and the artillery unloaded, Company A was to join the rest of the battalion west of the highway, six miles inland.

The assault phase went almost without incident. At 0700 15 September, the first wave of Company A in 11 LVTs from the USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2) secured Blue Beach without resistance. Forty minutes later, the first heliborne elements landed from the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2); again no opposition. Later that day, HMM-363 lifted Company A and the artillery battery from the beach area to positions west of Route 1, where they joined the rest of the battalion.

Early that afternoon, the Marines experienced the first serious contact with the NVA. At 1330, a platoon from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, attached to the BLT for the operation, encountered a NVA company five miles northeast of Dong Ha while reconnoitering the southwestern portion of the objective area. The well-camouflaged NVA soldiers were moving down a trail in single file, and almost bumped into the Marines. Both units opened fire simultaneously. The reconnaissance Marines, vastly outnumbered, called for help. Marine helicopters arrived to attempt an evacuation, but heavy ground fire prevented them from landing. Five helicopters were hit and two crewmen were wounded in the abortive attempt.

At this point, the Marines on the ground called for supporting arms. The 107mm howtar battery attached to BLT 1/26 pounded the area with continuous fire and four F4Bs from MAG-11 bombed,

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\*There had been some changes within the SLF since Operation Hastings in July. Colonel Harry D. Wortman relieved Colonel Richard A. Brennehan as SLF commander on 31 August. On 5 August, BLT 1/26, which had sailed in new shipping from San Diego, was designated the SLF battalion. After a landing exercise in the Philippines, the battalion participated in Operation Deckhouse III with the 173d Airborne Brigade in III Corps until 29 August.

strafed, and rocketed the enemy positions, allowing the helicopters to make a second attempt to extract the patrol. This time the extraction proceeded smoothly.

During the two-hour engagement, the Marine patrol suffered one killed, six wounded, and one Marine unaccounted for. The troops tried to find the missing man, but enemy fire forced them to give up the search. The patrol claimed that it had killed at least nine NVA and estimated that at least 30 North Vietnamese were killed by supporting arms.

After the extraction of the Marine reconnaissance element, Lieutenant Colonel Monti, the BLT commander, ordered Company A to move from its positions on Route 1 at daybreak and work its way over to the area where the action had occurred. By the evening of the 16th, the Marine company had arrived at its objective and dug in for the night. At 0330 the next morning, the NVA attacked under cover of mortar fire. Company A, supported by naval gunfire and artillery, repulsed the attackers. At first light, patrols were sent out; the Marines found 12 bodies and captured a wounded NVA soldier. The Americans found a cigarette lighter on the wounded man which belonged to the missing reconnaissance Marine. The prisoner claimed that the Marine had died and that he had helped to bury him. The prisoner was evacuated to the *Iwo Jima* for treatment; he died on the operating table. Later that day, a Marine patrol found the grave of the dead American.

The battalion encountered much more opposition in the northwestern area near the DMZ. On the 16th, Company D came under heavy mortar fire, less than a mile from the DMZ. The mortar positions were so close that the Marines could hear the rounds drop into the enemy tubes. The Marines called for naval gunfire and the heavy cruiser *Saint Paul* (CA 73) responded with eight-inch guns. During the follow-up search, the Marine company found three destroyed mortars and 14 bodies.

South of Company D, Company B was also hit. One of its platoons walked into an enemy ambush on the outskirts of a hamlet. The Marines, outnumbered, took cover in the rice paddies. Once more air and artillery were called. After a 75-minute engagement, the enemy broke contact. The Marines were unable to determine enemy casualties; Company B suffered two dead and nine wounded.

The Marines soon discovered that the North Viet-

namese had constructed a large tunnel and bunker complex in the Con Thien and Gio Linh areas. Each time the battalion probed the northwestern portion of its area of operations, the enemy responded with heavy fire from well-concealed positions. Although Deckhouse IV officially ended on 18 September, the battalion remained ashore and came under the operational control of the 4th Marines until 24 September. The next day, the 25th, the battalion reverted to its SLF role and left the DMZ sector. During the period the battalion was committed to operations ashore, it killed at least 200 of the enemy at a cost of 203 casualties including 36 killed.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Continued Fighting for Nui Cay Tre (Mutter) Ridge and the Razorback*

While the SLF explored the swamps and rice paddies of the northern coastal plain of Quang Tri Province, action intensified in the western sector of the Prairie operation area. In contrast to the relatively flat eastern terrain, this fighting took place in the mountains and gullies north of the Rockpile, centering on the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. According to American intelligence agencies, the North Vietnamese *324B Division* had established extensive defenses there to protect its infiltration routes. On 8 September, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines returned to the Rockpile from Dong Ha and relieved the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines. Colonel Cereghino ordered Lieutenant Colonel Westerman to conduct a deep reconnaissance toward Nui Cay Tre to determine the extent of enemy operations in the area. On 15 September, Companies B and D left the battalion perimeter near the Rockpile and advanced toward the southern approaches of the ridge.

The enemy struck at noon the next day. At that time, both companies were moving in column, with Company D in the lead. The NVA allowed the first two platoons to enter their ambush position before opening fire. Captain Daniel K. McMahon, Jr., the Company D commander, then pushed his third platoon forward into the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Westerman ordered Company B to move up to the forward company's positions. The two companies established a perimeter and Captain McMahon reported to Westerman: "We have 'em just where we want them, they're all the way around us."<sup>34</sup> The two Marine companies were surrounded by a North Viet-

namese battalion and the fight would last two and one-half days.

The Marines dug in. Marine air and artillery provided constant supporting fire. Helicopters from MAG-16 also played a vital role in sustaining the surrounded troops. The Marines on the ground hacked out a crude landing zone, for resupply helicopters. Colonel Cereghino ordered Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff to move his battalion to assist Westerman's two companies. After a two-day march from Cam Lo, the lead elements of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines reached the surrounded units the evening of 18 September, later joined by the rest of the battalion, and the relief was completed.

The enemy was gone, but Marine air, artillery, and the two infantry companies were credited with killing at least 170 of the North Vietnamese. Nine Marines from Westerman's battalion were killed in the battle.

*An 81mm mortar team from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines exchanges fire with the enemy near the Rockpile-Razorback complex. According to the original caption, the NVA, firing an 82mm mortar, returned round for round.*

Marine Corps Photo A187852



The 1st Battalion, 4th Marines units returned to the battalion command post near the Rockpile on 19 September, while the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines continued to patrol in the Nui Cay Tre area. Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff's companies operated south of the Nui Cay Tre ridge for the next two days, coming under increasing enemy pressure, but then the battalion was ordered to withdraw to positions near the Rockpile.

Colonel Cereghino had two reasons for moving Roothoff back to the Rockpile. To attack the ridge from the south was futile; it was apparent that the North Vietnamese were strongly entrenched there, waiting for the Marines. Secondly, the North Vietnamese had returned to the Razorback and were mortaring the Rockpile. The regimental commander decided first to clean out the Razorback.

Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff established a combat base west of the Rockpile on 22 September, and ordered Companies F and G to sweep to the Razorback. On the 24th, a Company G patrol spotted five North Vietnamese soldiers on the western slopes of the hill mass and killed them, but 10 minutes later the company reported that it was under fire and "unable to advance or withdraw." The battalion commander ordered Company F to go to the assistance of Company G, but heavy enemy fire prevented the two companies from joining. Lieutenant Colonel Roothoff then directed both companies to back off so that air and artillery could hit the area.<sup>35</sup>

A platoon of Company F commanded by First Lieutenant Robert T. Willis was moving to the relief of Company G when it came upon a trail which led the Marines into the enemy base camp. As the platoon entered the camp, the point man suddenly stopped because he heard a noise. Lieutenant Willis went forward to see what was happening. An enemy soldier, probably a sentry, fired, killing a machine gun team leader and slipped away. The Marines entered the camp from the rear, destroyed an enemy mortar, and then waited. According to Lieutenant Willis:

We sat in their own positions practically and waited for them [the NVA] to come back to their base camp from their attack on Golf Company. Two of my people who had reported to my unit at Cam Lo eight days earlier killed seven of the [NVA] coming up the trail where they were hitting Golf Company. They tried to mortar us—mortar their own base camp . . . We kept moving toward them and finally got them pinned in a gulch . . . We couldn't

get into it and they couldn't get out of it. We called for air and artillery and pretty well destroyed it.<sup>36</sup>

The platoon was credited with killing 58 NVA. Company F reported three dead and 17 wounded while Company G suffered 3 Marines killed, 26 wounded, and 7 missing.<sup>37</sup>

The 2d Battalion, 7th Marines participation in Prairie was over. On 28 September, the battalion began moving to the rear. Two days later, Company G recovered the bodies of the seven Marines missing since the 22d, and then left for Dong Ha. At Dong Ha, Lieutenant Colonel John J. Hess' newly arrived 2d Battalion, 9th Marines relieved Roothoff's battalion, which rejoined its parent regiment at Chu Lai.

Earlier in the month, Colonel Cereghino had developed another plan to drive the North Vietnamese off the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline to protect the Rockpile—Razorback—Thon Son Lam area. He intended to have Lieutenant Colonel William J. Masterpool's 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, which had arrived at Dong Ha from Phu Bai on 17 September, attack the Nui Cay Tre heights. The attack was to come in from the east to cut into the enemy's flank. This attack was to result in the longest action of Prairie, from 22 September until 5 October.

On the morning of 22 September, Marine air and artillery, in an attempt not to give away the actual landing zone of Masterpool's battalion, bombarded a false target area. Three minutes after the artillery, commanded since the end of August by Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kirchmann, stopped firing, eight MAG-16 CH-46s brought the first elements of the 3d Battalion into the actual landing zone, 4,500 meters to the east of the Nui Cay Tre ridgeline. The battalion secured its two objectives, roughly 1,500 meters northwest of the LZ on the first day and dug in for the night. During the first few days, the Marines had as much trouble with the terrain as they did with the enemy. According to some veteran troops, the ground was covered with the densest vegetation they had encountered. At the foot of the ridgeline, there was a six-foot layer of brush which rose straight up to a canopy of bamboo and deciduous trees. Some of these trees were eight feet in diameter and the canopy was so thick that almost no light penetrated the jungle below.

The lead units of the battalion, Companies K and L, began their ascent, each Marine carrying only his



Marine Corps Photo A187871

*A wounded Marine is being carried by four of his comrades to an evacuation site. The battalion encountered strong enemy resistance near the Razorback.*

weapon, ammunition, two canteens, a poncho, and two socks stuffed with C-rations in his pockets. The only method of resupply was by helicopter and the Marines had to hack out the landing zones with what little equipment they had. Engineers used chain saws and axes to clear an LZ, but only the smaller UH-34s could land in these restricted sites, thus limiting the amount of supplies that could be brought in at one time. The only way the lead elements could move through the jungle was in column, slashing at the dense growth with their machetes. Occasionally they had to wait for bombs and napalm to blast or burn the jungle so the column could move again.<sup>38</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool compared his tactics with the action of a ballpoint pen. According to the battalion commander:

The idea was to probe slowly with the tip of the pen and then, when contact was made, retract the point into the pen's larger sleeve; that is, as soon as contact was made, supporting fire including napalm was directed onto the enemy positions.<sup>39</sup>

Two hills dominated the ridgeline, Hill 484, the Marines' final objective, and Hill 400, 3,000 meters east of 484. As the lead element, Company L, approached Hill 400, the closer of the two heights, it

became obvious that the Marines were entering the enemy's main line of resistance. According to the company commander, Captain Roger K. Ryman:

As we got closer to 400, moving along some of the lower hills in front of it, we saw more and more enemy positions, including enough huts in the ravines to harbor a regiment, and piles and piles of ammunition. NVA bodies lying about and hastily dug graves were signs that we were moving right behind them.<sup>40</sup>

The North Vietnamese resistance was skillful. Ryman recalled:

Their fire discipline remained excellent. Invariably they'd pick just the right piece of terrain, where it was so

*During the fighting for Nui Cay Tre, a Marine from Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines rushes forward carrying a 3.5-inch rocket round in his hand. One of the remaining Marines is seen talking on the radio while the other uses his compass to get a position fix.*

Marine Corps Photo A187904

narrow that we couldn't maneuver on the flanks, and they'd dig in and wait for us in the bottleneck. Sometimes they'd let the point man go by and then let us have it. On other parts of the ridgeline trail, where it dipped down through the thickest sections of the jungle, we would suddenly see a patch of vegetation moving towards us, and that was the only way we could detect an enemy soldier. Once, I heard a sudden snicker when one of our men slipped. The sound gave away a concealed enemy position a few feet away, and started a fire fight. The NVA was damn clever. We'd walk the artillery in—that is, direct fifty yards at a time towards us, sensing by sound where it was dropping. Then we'd pull back, opening the artillery sheath, and call for saturated firing in the area. But the NVA would guess what we were doing, and when we pulled back they'd quickly follow us into the safety zone between us and where the shells were dropping. And when the shelling stopped, they'd start shooting again.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of the slow going, by dusk on the 26th, Company L, reinforced by Company K, had secured a portion of Hill 400 and was dug in for the night.

The heaviest fighting occurred during the next two days. At 0730 on 27 September, Company K, commanded by Captain James J. Carroll, moved toward its next objective, 1,000 meters to the southwest, when it ran into the enemy. At noon, the company reported NVA all around its flanks on the lower leg of L-shaped Hill 400. After an hour and half, the North Vietnamese broke contact. Carroll's company already had 7 dead, 25 wounded, and 1 missing. Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered the rest of the battalion to join Company K and set up defensive positions.

The next morning Company K pushed forward once more but immediately encountered enemy troops in heavily reinforced bunkers. The Marines pulled back and called in artillery. Captain Carroll sent a patrol out to search for the Marine reported missing during the previous day's fighting. At this point, the NVA counterattacked. Elements of Companies I and M reinforced Carroll's company and helped to throw back the enemy. One of Captain Carroll's platoon leaders, Sergeant Anthony Downey, described the action: "The stuff was so thick you couldn't tell who was firing, Charlie or us. They had everything—mortars, mines, and heavy weapons—and they had ladders in the trees for spotters to climb up and direct fire."<sup>42</sup> The Marine companies killed 50 of the enemy while six Marines died and nine were wounded. They also found the body of the Marine missing from the previous day's fighting. By the end of the 28th, the Marines con-





trolled Hill 400 and prepared to advance to Hill 484.<sup>43</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool continued his step-by-step approach, alternating companies as the advance units. On 2 October, Captain Robert G. Handrahan's Company M secured a third hill between Hills 400 and 484, 500 meters east of Hill 484. The rest of the battalion joined the lead company later that day and prepared defensive positions for the night. The next day Company I found 25 enemy bunkers on "the Fake," the name the Marines gave the hill since it was not specifically marked on their maps. The bunkers contained ammunition, equipment, and documents, but no NVA. The Marines were ready to take the final objective, Hill 484.

At 0930 on 4 October, Captain Handrahan's 1st Platoon led the assault against heavy resistance from well-concealed bunkers. The Marines tried a frontal assault but were thrown back. Then, while the 1st Platoon put down a base of fire, the 2d Platoon tried to envelop the enemy's left, but this action also failed when the North Vietnamese countered with grenades from the upper slope. Because of the steepness of the terrain and the inability of Handrahan to call in supporting arms "without significant damage to . . . [his] company," Lieutenant Colonel Masterpool ordered the company to pull back to "the Fake."<sup>44</sup> Marine air and artillery then attempted to soften the North Vietnamese positions.



Marine Corps Photo A188472  
*Capt James J. Carroll, Commanding Officer, Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, throws a grenade at the enemy during the struggle for Nui Cay Tre. Carroll was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross and the artillery plateau was renamed Camp Carroll in his honor.*

*An M60 machine gun crew provides covering fire for the advance up Nui Cay Tre. This fighting was some of the heaviest of the war.*

Marine Corps Photo A187837



At 1000 the next morning, and after another airstrike on the enemy, Company M advanced once more against Hill 484. Believing that artillery would be useless because of the slope, Handrahan the previous night had arranged for direct fire from the tank company at two concentration points. The company commander recalled that:

As we approached the crest, I requested fire on concentration point one, intending to shift as we neared the top . . . We had agreed on five rounds but only two came at the target and they were well over.<sup>45</sup>

Handrahan remembered that he then heard “explosions to my rear. I again requested support over the TAC net but was informed that they were receiving incoming. I continued without support.” Company M’s 2d platoon gained the crest of Hill 484 at 1200, followed by the 1st Platoon. The NVA held on until 1330 and then broke contact and fled into the

*Marines from Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines examine a captured enemy machine gun position on Nui Cay Tre. The broken and stripped trees are a result of a pre-attack airstrike.*

Marine Corps Photo A187841



Marine Corps Photo A187838

*1stLt Edward J. Crowell of Company M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines reports that the company had secured Hill 484. The taking of Hill 484 on 5 October ended the fight for Nui Cay Tre.*

jungle, leaving behind 10 bodies. Captain Handrahan later wrote that his men saw numerous blood trails and recovered some 16-20 weapons.<sup>46</sup>

Handrahan’s company sustained only six wounded in the attack, but further to the rear, Marine tank shells accidentally fell upon Hill 400, killing three Marines and wounding 10 others. Among the dead was Captain James J. Carroll who had been directing fire against Hill 484. The young captain, who had arrived in Vietnam only the month before, had described the fight for Hill 400, as “the high point of my career,” and ironically, was to die there as a result of American fire.<sup>47</sup>\* Carroll was awarded the Navy

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\*Major Handrahan commented that he and Captain Carroll had laid in the tank fire the previous evening, but later learned “that the tanks we adjusted had been replaced and guns were relaid.” Maj Robert G. Handrahan, Comments on draft MS, dtd 12Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).





Marine Corps Photo A187944

*The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines holds a special ceremony at Dong Ha in honor of its fallen members in the struggle for Nui Cay Tre. The ridgeline was renamed "Mutter" Ridge, after the radio call sign of the 3d Battalion.*

Cross for his actions during Prairie and the artillery base west of Cam Lo was renamed Camp Carroll in his honor.

The battle for Nui Cay Tre was over, but the price had been high, both for the Marines and the North Vietnamese. From 22 September through 4 October, the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines suffered 20 dead while killing 100 enemy. Nui Cay Tre thereafter was known as "Mutter" Ridge, after the call sign of Masterpool's 3d Battalion.

*The Opening of Khe Sanh  
and the 3d Marine Division Moves North*

Generals Walt and Kyle watched the intensifying action in northern Quang Tri Province with growing concern. In Saigon, General Westmoreland took an

even more alarmed view of the situation. He foresaw the likelihood of large numbers of North Vietnamese troops moving south through the DMZ and was apprehensive of what "might occur if the two NVA divisions did, in fact, elect to move into the Quang Tri area." He especially feared that the North Vietnamese might skip around the main Marine defenses keyed on the Rockpile and Dong Ha and attempt to open a corridor in the northwest corner of Quang Tri Province in the mountains bordering both Laos and North Vietnam. General Westmoreland suggested that General Walt reinforce Khe Sanh, 17 kilometers southwest of the Rockpile and 22 kilometers south of the DMZ, with a Marine battalion.<sup>48</sup>

The Marine command resisted Westmoreland's suggestion until the matter came to a head. More than one Marine general expressed the belief that Khe Sanh had no basic military value. General English, the 3d Marine Division ADC, declared

"When you're at Khe Sanh, you're not really anywhere. It's far away from everything. You could lose it and you really haven't lost a damn thing."<sup>49</sup> Despite Marine protests, it was soon obvious that III MAF would have to move into the area. The catalyst was a 26 September intelligence report that pinpointed a North Vietnamese troop concentration and base camp only 14 kilometers northeast of Khe Sanh.<sup>50</sup> General Walt bowed to the inevitable and ordered Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Wickwire's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, already on the alert to move to Dong Ha from Da Nang, to move to Khe Sanh instead. This was done reluctantly; the III MAF G-3, Colonel Chaisson, aptly declared:

We were not interested in putting a battalion at Khe Sanh . . . [but] had we not done it, we would have been directed to put it out there . . . we put it out just to retain that little prestige of doing it on your own volition rather than doing it with a shoe in your tail.<sup>51</sup>

In any event, Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire received only 12 hours' notice that the battalion's next location was to be in Khe Sanh.<sup>52</sup>

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Fredric A. Green, who at the time was on the III MAF staff, observed that the 26 September report that pinpointed the North Vietnamese concentrations near Khe Sanh was a MACV intelligence report and not one from III MAF. Green remarked: "III MAF had been monitoring the base camp and infiltration for several months. This was neither new, threatening, nor alarming." LtCol Fredric A. Green, Comments on draft MS, n.d. [Jun 78] (Vietnam Comment File).

\*\*General Westmoreland commented that he understood why the Marine command from its local perspective was reluctant to go into Khe Sanh. From the MACV point of view, however, Westmoreland stated that he had to consider the following main points:

"/1/ A need for the base to launch intelligence operations into Laos such as cross border covert patrols, and responsive infiltration flights by small observation aircraft.

"/2/ A northern anchor to defenses south of the DMZ. A base from which major movement from Laos along Route 9, could be blocked. An area near the border from which operations could be launched to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos when, and if, authorized by political authority.

"/3/ To position ourselves to fight large North Vietnamese Army units without delivery of our fires (artillery and tactical air) being complicated by the proximity of civilian population.

"/4/ Finally, I wanted the Marines to get to know the area and to gain confidence in fighting there if required."

Gen William C. Westmoreland, Comments on draft MS, dtd 27May78 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 109, and Chapter 9 of this volume.



Marine Corps Photo A187956  
*The 1st Battalion, 3d Marines conducts a patrol near Khe Sanh. Montagnard tribesmen and their elephants were a common sight at this new Marine base.*

On 29 September, Marine KC-130 transports ferried Wickwire's battalion, reinforced with an artillery battery, to Khe Sanh. Its new mission was to determine the extent of the enemy buildup in the area. Lieutenant Colonel Wickwire established liaison with the U.S. Army Special Forces advisor at Khe Sanh who believed that the area was in imminent danger of being overrun.<sup>52</sup> The Marines established their area of operations, coordinated their activities with the ARVN in the area, and manned defensive positions around the Khe Sanh airstrip. The 1st Battalion conducted extensive patrolling out to maximum artillery range, but made little contact with any North Vietnamese troops. The original 30-day stay of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines was extended into 1967. During this period, the Marines killed 15 North Vietnamese troops, but North Vietnamese intentions remained obscure.

According to Colonel Chaisson:

Since we put it [1/3] out there, there has been no increase in the threat that existed at the time, nor may I add was there any substantial decrease in the threat that was in that particular area. They're still picking up about the same type of sightings. Nothing that alarms you, but enough to convince the people who want to read the mail that way that there could be one or more battalions in the northwest corner [of South Vietnam].<sup>53</sup>

At the time of the move to Khe Sanh, MACV received reports of an "unprecedented rapid buildup of enemy forces . . . along the entire length of the DMZ." Westmoreland was convinced that the North Vietnamese were preparing a massive advance into Quang Tri Province.<sup>54\*</sup>

Reacting to this intelligence, III MAF reestablished Task Force Delta and reinforced the northern border area. On 1 October, General English, the 3d Marine Division ADC, opened the Task Force Delta command post at Dong Ha and assumed responsibility for the Prairie Operation from Colonel Cereghino. With the positioning of Wickwire's battalion at Khe Sanh and the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel William C. Airheart's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at Dong Ha from Chu Lai on 30 September and 1 October, English had six infantry battalions under his command, reinforced by Kirchmann's artillery and other supporting units.\*\*

Reshuffling of III MAF units throughout northern I Corps continued during the first weeks of October. On 6 October, General Walt ordered the 3d Marine Division to displace from Da Nang into Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces. With this move the 1st Marine Division assumed the responsibility for the Da Nang TAOR in addition to the Chu Lai area of operations. Four days later, General Kyle opened the new 3d Marine Division CP at Phu Bai, but left one regiment, the 9th Marines, at Da Nang, under the operational control of the 1st Marine Division. At the same time, General Westmoreland moved one U.S. Army battalion, the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, to Da Nang to reinforce



Marine Corps Photo A187940  
*Headquarters personnel from the 3d Marine Division load trucks at Da Nang for the move to Phu Bai. The 1st Marine Division assumed control of the Da Nang TAOR while the 3d Division retained responsibility for operations in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.*

*Three Marines from the 3d Marines relax for a moment in November 1966 during Operation Prairie and attempt to keep dry. During the northeast monsoon season, both the allies and the NVA curtailed their activities in the DMZ sector.*

Marine Corps Photo A188069



\*General English recalled that a CinCPac intelligence analysis predicted that the NVA were to launch a "three-division attack in 72 hours." BGen Lowell E. English intvw by FMFPac, 9Jan67 (No. 402, Oral Hist Col, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC). Lieutenant Colonel Green remarked that "... this hypothesis was intensely war-gamed at III MAF Headquarters by a Special War Games Group appointed by General Walt. Results were used to brief Walt, Westmoreland, and were the basis of III MAF and MACV contingency planning." LtCol Fredric A. Green, Comments on draft MS, n.d.[Jun78] (Vietnam Comment File). See Chapter 21 for the discussion of U.S. contingency plans.

\*\*The six were 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; 3d Battalion, 4th Marines; 2d Battalion, 5th Marines; 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. The latter two battalions had just relieved 2d Battalion, 4th Marines and 2d Battalion, 7th Marines in the Prairie area of operations.

the TAOR there. Two Army artillery battalions, the 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery and the 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery, arrived in the Prairie area. Colonel Benjamin S. Read, the commanding officer of the 12th Marines, who had moved his CP from Da Nang to Dong Ha, had command of both the Marine and Army artillery in Prairie. General Kyle deactivated Task Force Delta and established a 3d Marine Division (Forward) Headquarters at Dong Ha to control the operation. General English still retained command, but received additional staff personnel for his headquarters.

During this same period, the 3d Marines, under Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, took over the western half of the Prairie TAOR while the 4th Marines assumed the responsibility for the eastern half. Colonel Cereghino's headquarters was located at Dong Ha and his area of operations extended for roughly 5,000 meters eastward of Con Thien. One battalion, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, took over Con Thien from the ARVN while the other two battalions of the regiment, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, operated closer to Dong Ha and Cam Lo. The 3d Marines was responsible for the defense of the Camp Carroll\*-Rockpile area while Wickwire's unit at Khe Sanh reported directly to General English.

Despite the massive III MAF preparations, or perhaps because of them, the expected enemy offensive never materialized. There had been no major action in the region since the capture of "Mutter" Ridge, although Airheart's battalion experienced some probes in mid-October. During November, intelligence sources indicated that the *324B Division* had retired north of the DMZ, although elements of the *341st Division* had infiltrated into the Cua Valley in the southern portion of the Prairie TAOR. Apparently, the mission of the *341st Division* had been to strengthen and train guerrilla units in the area. Although the enemy chose to remain inactive in the northern area during the northeast monsoon

season, there was every indication that fighting would start again once the rains stopped.\*\*

By the end of the year with the diminishing activity on the northern front, the Marine command reduced the infantry strength of the 3d Marine Division in Prairie to one regiment, the 3d Marines, and four battalions. The 4th Marines just before Christmas moved back into the Co Bi-Thanh Tan sector to conduct Operation Chinook.

For all intents and purposes, Prairie was no longer an operation, but rather an area of operations. The Marines had established another base area similar to those at Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Phu Bai. At the height of the Marine buildup in mid-November, General English commanded a force of approximately 8,000 Marines, including eight infantry battalions, supported by the 12th Marines. Marine artillery, reinforced by the two Army 175mm battalions, Navy gunfire ships, and Marine air, covered the entire DMZ area from the western border with Laos to the South China Sea.

Dong Ha had become a forward Marine base and the center of operations in the northern area. Its airfield and that at Khe Sanh had been lengthened so that both easily could handle KC-130 transports. The Marines and Navy also developed a sizeable port facility at Dong Ha to accommodate craft bringing supplies up the Cua Viet River. Within the Prairie TAOR, Marine helicopters resupplied individual units from Dong Ha.

During Prairie in 1966, the Marines had prevented the NVA from establishing a major operating base in northern Quang Tri Province and had killed over 1,000 of the enemy. Colonel Cereghino remembered, "At the beginning of Prairie we were fighting well trained and well equipped soldiers. At the end we were running into poorly equipped young soldiers and frustrated commanders."<sup>55</sup>

Yet the cost had been high in both men and Marine objectives. The Marines sustained casualties of 200 dead and well over 1,000 wounded. A sizeable Marine force still remained in the DMZ sector and the resulting dislocation of Marine units in the southern TAOR's seriously hampered the Marine pacification campaign.

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\*Colonel Edward E. Hammerbeck, who had assumed command of the 3d Marines in August, commented that in October 1966 when he established his CP in the north, the artillery plateau had not yet been designated Camp Carroll. He recalled that the official dedication of the base camp of the 3d Marines and the artillery plateau to Camp Carroll occurred on 10 November 1966, the Marine Corps Birthday. Col Edward E. Hammerbeck, Comments on draft MS, dtd 9Jun78 (Vietnam Comment File).

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\*\*The monsoon rainy season in most of I Corps begins in the latter part of October and ends in February.